



Christina's
CRUSADE
AMELIA C.
ADAMS

Christina's Crusade
The Broad Street Boarding House Book Four
by Amelia C. Adams

With thanks to my beta readers—Barbara, Bonnie, Cindy, Renee,
Sandy, Suzy, and Theresa.

Cover Design by Virginia McKevitt

About This Series:

The Broad Street Boarding House series was created as a multi-author project to bring together a large cast of characters and many different writing styles and perspectives. It's been so fun to coordinate with the authors involved and to hear all their fantastic story ideas. It's been especially fun to watch the characters come to life—Sophia and Sybil Cartwright are two of the most delightful ladies I've ever written about. We hope that you'll follow the series from start to finish, and if you'd like to [join our reader group](#), we'd love to have you!

Table of Contents:

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Epilogue

Christina Van Pelt stood with her hands folded, waiting for her father to put down his newspaper. She'd been standing there for several minutes. He knew she was there—in his eyes, anyone who wished to speak to him could wait patiently until he was ready to give them his full attention. As a little girl, she had often run off after a moment or two. Now that she was an adult, she could outlast him, and as he finally lowered the paper, she hid a smile.

“Well, what is it?” he asked.

“Father, did you have a chance to read the letter I left for you on the sideboard this morning?”

“I saw it and I put it in my pocket, but no, I haven't read it yet.”

Christina didn't reply. She merely waited.

Mr. Van Pelt began to search—first his left jacket pocket, and then the right. Once finding what he'd gone looking for, he opened it and began to read, lifting his eyebrow every so often. Christina wished he'd give some other indication of his thoughts.

Finally, he lowered the letter and peered at her through his round spectacles. “So, this . . . this Mrs. Powers,” he said, checking the letter briefly. “Your mother's friend . . . the rather odd woman with the wobbly double chin?”

“Yes, that's right,” Christina replied. It wasn't the most complimentary description, but it was accurate. Her father didn't mean to be unkind—he merely stated things in the most direct way possible. He considered anything else to be a waste of time.

“She seems rather taken with this . . . Denver place,” he said, glancing at the letter again. “And she seems rather infatuated with the idea of you joining her there.”

“I wouldn't say that she's *infatuated*, Father.”

“This level of gushiness far exceeds a casual interest.” He waved the letter. “She's practically begging you to come. Doesn't she know that you're a North Carolina girl through and through?”

"I believe she sees a need and feels that I can help address it," Christina replied. "Father, you know I've been at a loss ever since the school board decided to hire that awful Mr. Brewster and let me go. It's been all I can do to keep myself occupied. If things are as desperate in Denver as Mrs. Powers says, maybe I could do some good there."

"Yes, that was a terrible blow, and quite undeserved. If I still had children in school, I would have withdrawn them immediately once that mealy-mouthed mouse took over." Mr. Van Pelt shook his head as though to clear it of his negative thoughts. "So, you want to teach these poor offspring of the mines how to read, do you?"

"I do, Father, and their parents too, if they're interested. This is a chance for me to make a real difference for real people. The families here . . ." Christina hesitated. "They can all afford private tutors, and they behave as though sending their children to the schoolhouse is bestowing a grand gift upon the community. Education is so much more than that. It's—"

Mr. Van Pelt held up his hand. "I enjoy hearing your viewpoint on education, my dear, but I'm afraid we're about to be called into dinner, and I must cut you short. I'll think about this proposition and I'll discuss it with your mother, and we'll give you our answer tomorrow at breakfast."

"You will?" Christina was tremendously relieved that he hadn't told her no outright. "Thank you, Father."

He nodded just as the dinner bell rang.

Christina was of age, and she didn't need her parents' permission to undertake this sort of journey. However, she knew things would go more smoothly if she went with their blessing, and she also hoped that her father would give her some money to purchase the books and other supplies she would need. She would receive a substantial sum when he passed away, but until then, she was dependent on him for any sort of large expenditure.

She followed her father into the dining room, where they were greeted by her beaming mother. "I believe we've finally done it," she said. "It's taken us . . . oh, gracious. Months and months, I'd say . . .

but Cook and I have mastered the art of cooking duck the French way.”

“That’s wonderful, Mother,” Christina said, smiling. The Nelsons down the street had hired a French cook the year previously, and that had caused no small amount of jealousy in their neighborhood. Now her mother would feel a bit better about their own dinner offerings.

As if such things really mattered when there were small children being sent off to the coal mines instead of being sent to school . . . Christina took her seat and forced herself to think more positive thoughts. Everyone had their own passions, their own interests, and none were necessarily superior. It would serve her well to be less judgmental of others.

The duck was delicious, and Christina thanked her mother for the wonderful meal before she climbed the stairs to her room. She was tired and didn’t feel up to an evening spent playing cards or doing needlework in the parlor. She changed into her nightclothes, then sat at her desk with a sheet of paper. If her parents approved of her desire to go to Denver, she’d want to be prepared, and making a list of everything she’d need would help settle her mind.

She began by jotting down the basic supplies—slates, pencils, and paper. Then she listed the books she’d most want to take with her. A set of McGuffey readers was a must, as were copies of books with great moral intent and a focus on higher thinking. She wanted to expand the minds of her students, not just teach them the sounds of the letters.

As she worked, she imagined herself sharing her ideas with children of her own, but she pushed that thought to the side. She’d long ago accepted the fact that she would likely never marry. She was too independent in her thinking to make a good wife.

The last fellow who had shown any interest in her finally ended their relationship by saying he didn’t care to sit through another of her lectures disguised as a conversation. There had been a kernel of truth to that, but it still stung. What stung perhaps the most was the fact that she had no idea how to change that flaw in herself. Her deeply held convictions bled through into everything she did. If being

married meant giving up her opinions, she'd accept her fate as a spinster as cheerfully as she could.

But surely not every man in the world wanted a dimwitted wife . .

Christina sighed and blotted her page. As sure as she was that intelligent and fair-minded men existed—and probably even some nearby—she wasn't going to worry about it. What was meant to be would indeed be, and at the moment, she wanted to visit her mother's friend in Denver and see what could be done about increasing literacy amongst the miners and their children. She sent a quick prayer heavenward that her parents would agree, then climbed into bed with a novel. Not everything she read had to be strictly educational.

When Christina was summoned downstairs the next morning before breakfast, she immediately began to fear the worst. She had expected to wait the length of the meal before her father would be ready to open the discussion. She finished tying up her hair, then trotted down the stairs, hoping he'd give his refusal quickly so the dread wouldn't become too painful.

"Good morning, Father," she said as she entered his study. Her mother sat in a chair next to his desk, a balled-up kerchief in her hand. "Good morning, Mother."

Mr. Van Pelt gave his daughter a nod. He stood by the bookcase, seeming a bit more agitated than usual. "Good morning. We trust you slept well."

"Yes, Father. I did."

"Your mother and I did not!" He turned on his heel and strode over to the window. "I presented Mrs. Powers' letter to her before we retired, and we did nothing but discuss it all night long. I don't believe either of us got a wink of sleep until well after two—if then."

Disappointment settled in Christina's stomach like a poorly cooked meal. "I'm sorry, Father. I didn't mean to upset you. I'll write her today and decline."

"You'll do no such thing!"

"I . . . I beg your pardon?"

Mr. Van Pelt turned from the window, his expression sober. “We were up so late because we were discussing just how much we’re going to miss you.”

Christina was flabbergasted. She sank into a nearby chair as she tried to find words for a response. “You think I should go?”

“You’ve needed to find your own path for a while now, my dear,” her mother said. “We had hoped that you’d be married by now, but you shouldn’t delay your adventures just because the right man hasn’t come along. There’s a whole world out there for you to discover, and as long as you’re being watched over by Agnes Powers, I’ll feel entirely confident that you’ll be all right.”

Mr. Van Pelt nodded. “You’ll do fine, daughter. You’ll do fine.”

Christina pressed her hands to her cheeks. Such a whirlwind of emotion. She’d never traveled by herself before, she’d rarely spent a night away from home—and now she was planning to leave North Carolina and try to make a place for herself halfway across the country. It was exciting and terrifying all at once.

“Thank you, Mother. Thank you, Father,” she said when she could finally use her voice. “I don’t know why this means so much to me, but it really does.”

Mrs. Van Pelt lifted her handkerchief to her eyes. “You’re welcome, but you’d better write to us every single day. Every day without fail! And . . . how long do you think you’ll be gone? You *will* be back soon, won’t you?”

Christina hadn’t given any thought to staying away longer than a few months, but once the question was posed, she wondered about it. “I honestly don’t know,” she replied. “I might arrive there and be so frightened that I turn around and come right home.”

“Oh, I doubt you’d do that,” her father said.

At the same time, her mother said. “Oh, that would be nice. Then we’d have you back before we know it!”

Christina smiled at her parents’ opposite reactions. It didn’t surprise her that they viewed the situation differently—that was often the case. “I’ll write to Mrs. Powers immediately, and I’ll plan to leave in a week,” she said. “That should give me enough time to get ready.”

Mr. Van Pelt reached into his pocket and withdrew some folded bills. “I’m sure you’ll need a few things,” he said as he handed the money to her. “Clothes for yourself or books for the children—use it at your discretion. And here’s Mrs. Powers’ letter as well—you’ll need this information.”

“Thank you, Father.” Christina’s heart swelled with gratitude. She’d hoped her father would give her some money, but she hadn’t expected him to give her quite so much. She didn’t pause to count it in front of him—that would be rude—but the bundle was thick enough that she suspected a generous donation. “I’ll spend it wisely.”

He cleared his throat. “Well now, let’s not stand around here like blubbering idiots. Cook’s had breakfast on the table for several minutes now—we’ll be lucky if our eggs aren’t stone cold.”

Cook had never served cold eggs a day in her life, but Christina recognized her father’s need to deflect. He wasn’t an emotional man, but his eyes were a bit watery at the moment, something that touched her heart deeply. She tucked the money into her sleeve and followed her parents into the dining room.

All during breakfast, Christina vacillated between feelings of excitement and reluctance to leave home. Like her mother, she’d always thought that when she moved out of her parents’ house, she’d be getting married and creating a home of her own. Her life had taken her down a different road, so it was time for her to determine a new destination.

She finished her eggs and made a half-hearted attempt with the bacon, but she wasn’t very hungry. She waited until her parents were finished before excusing herself to her room so she could write that very important letter.

First, though, she wanted to double-check the amount of money her father had given her so she’d know her budget for books and supplies.

Oh, goodness. He’d given her nearly twice what she’d first assumed.

Her initial thought was that perhaps he’d made a mistake and given her money meant for something else, but no—her father was a

very careful man. This was no mistake. He was demonstrating the trust he had in her abilities, and that meant more to her than the actual dollar amount ever could. He wasn't the easiest man to understand, but he truly did have a gentle heart beneath all the bluster.

She tucked the money into her reticule for safekeeping, then sat down at her desk and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper.

Mrs. Van Pelt and Mrs. Powers had attended the same ladies' college as young women, and they had stayed in touch over the years. Mrs. Powers had married an architect who designed beautiful homes for the wealthy, and he was constantly traveling. They'd never had children, so Mrs. Powers decided to travel with him, thinking of it as an adventure rather than a hardship.

When they had come through the Van Pelts' small North Carolina town two years previously, Christina had enjoyed getting to know them and hearing of their various journeys. They'd discussed Christina's employment as a teacher and her passion for literacy, and that discussion had been on Mrs. Powers' mind as she wrote Christina, asking her to consider making the trip.

Christina's hand trembled as she began her response.

Dear Mrs. Powers,

I was surprised and thrilled to receive your letter asking if I would come to Denver. I'd never thought of such a thing before, but from the moment I heard your suggestion, I've been able to think of nothing else. My parents are both in agreement, and so I'm delighted to tell you that yes, I will come. I will leave here in a week's time. The exact day isn't known yet, as I need to consult with the stagecoach line and also the railroad for the transportation schedule, but that will all be worked out shortly.

I'm honored that you would think of me for such an important task. I'm looking forward to teaching again. I've missed it so very much. Perhaps I can take on some private paying students to supplement my income while I'm donating my time in other areas. I'll be most curious to look into that when I arrive.

Thank you again,

Christina Van Pelt

There now. The first step out of many had just been taken. She inhaled, still nervous, but feeling resolved. This was the right choice—she could feel it. Her nerves didn't dissuade her—she knew that every brave action came with some amount of trepidation. She would march forward anyway.

John Hall stood in the doorway of his schoolhouse and watched the children scampering around in the yard. The first day of school was always difficult, but that day had felt particularly tough, and there were still three hours to go. He didn't know why he'd struggled so much that morning. Was it his lack of sleep the night before, or was this group of children more challenging than those he'd taught in the past? Even his returning students from the previous year seemed on edge, wiggly, perhaps even a bit confrontational, and he'd let them out for recess twenty minutes early for his own benefit. If things didn't calm down after lunch, he'd need to rethink his strategies and devise a new plan to capture their attention and their trust.

"Good morning, Mr. Hall!"

He was pulled from his thoughts by a bright voice, and he looked over at the schoolyard fence to see Miss Sybil Cartwright standing there, waving at him. He couldn't help but smile—Miss Sybil brought sunshine wherever she went, and it was impossible to stay glum in her presence. He descended the steps and crossed the yard, taking her hand across the fence when he reached her.

"Good morning, Miss Sybil! What brings you by today?"

"I found myself out of ribbon when I sat down to do my sewing. You might think such a thing would be impossible—after all, I have more ribbon than anyone I know—but it wasn't quite the right color. I needed more of a crimson and less of a red, you see. So I'm on my way to the mercantile, even though my sister disapproves. But you don't disapprove, do you, Mr. Hall? You understand that having the proper color makes all the difference?"

"I approve by the bucket," John replied. "You should have all the ribbon you wish, Miss Sybil. I can think of no one who deserves it more."

She beamed. "Oh, aren't you just the sweetest? And tell me—how is the first day of school coming along? It looks like you have quite the

crowd this year.”

John nodded. “Twenty-four enrolled with only one absent. I won’t lie, Miss Sybil—we’ve had a difficult morning. It’s hard to ask children to sit still indoors when it’s such a beautiful day outside. If the lunch break doesn’t help them settle their wiggles, we may bring our history books outside and study under the trees today.”

“That’s a lovely idea. Maybe even I would find history interesting if I were learning about it under the trees.” She gave him another bright smile. “Well, I won’t keep you—I know you’re on a schedule. I do hope the rest of your day goes smoothly.”

“Thank you, Miss Sybil, and I hope you find the perfect shade of crimson.”

She wiggled her fingers at him, then resumed her walk, and he chuckled quietly. Did he even know there was a difference between crimson and red? He hadn’t considered it before, but now he was curious, and he decided to stop by the mercantile himself on the way home and ask Mrs. Harris if he could see a sample of each.

A loud screech pulled his attention to the western end of the playground. John turned to see Molly McGovern running toward him, her cheeks streaked with dirt and tears, and Billy Green right behind her, chasing her with a small snake.

“Ha, ha! Molly’s a baby! Scared of a little snake!” Billy’s face was the picture of utter glee.

John reached out and caught Billy’s arm as he dashed past. The boy’s feet went out from under him and he swung around to face John on one toe. Even with that momentum, he didn’t lose his grip on the snake.

“Billy, this is not how we behave,” John said in a low voice as he set the boy back on his feet. “You’re being unkind to Molly, and you’re being unkind to that snake. Not only that, but you’re teaching all the other children that it’s all right to taunt.”

Billy scrunched up his face. “I’m not teachin’ ’em anything—you’re the teacher, Mr. Hall.”

“Oh, but you *are* teaching them, Billy. All those boys over there? They look up to you. They want to be like you. And if they see you

chasing Molly around like that, what do you think they're going to do?"

"They're *all* gonna chase Molly?"

"They might not all chase the same girl, but they might chase the others. And what about this poor snake? I bet you've about scared him to death."

Billy looked at his snake thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right. I wouldn't like it if someone grabbed me and shoved me in some giant girl's face."

John tried not to smile. "That's right. You must think about the other person's feelings—or in this case, the snake's feelings."

Billy's shoulders slumped. "I just wanted to get Ol' Molly back for telling her friends that she's gonna marry me someday. I'm not gonna marry Ol' Molly, Mr. Hall. She's sweet on me, but I'm not sweet on her. I'm not sweet on nobody."

"You're not sweet on anybody," John automatically corrected.

"That's what I said. So, you see, Mr. Hall, I had to do somethin'."

John nodded. "That's a problem indeed. But what if you handled it the gentlemanly way?"

"The *what* way?"

"The gentlemanly way. How do you think a gentleman would tell a lady that he didn't want to marry her?"

"Well, that's just the thing, Mr. Hall. I'm not a gentleman . . . I'm just a boy."

This time, John had to smile. "Yes, you're a boy, but you can be a gentlemanly boy."

Billy shook his head. "I don't know about that . . ."

"Sure you do. Now, how do you think a gentlemanly boy would handle this situation?"

"I dunno. He'd probably have to marry Ol' Molly because he'd be too much of a gentleman to tell her no!"

"First of all, I think he'd let the snake go free." John waited until Billy had carried the snake over to the edge of the grass and let it slither away. "And next, I think he'd have a conversation with Molly."

"What do you mean?"

“Talk to her.”

Billy shook his head. “Oh, no, Mr. Hall. I can’t talk to a girl. You know what happens when you talk to a girl? Then you really *do* have to marry them. No one ever lets up on you for a minute until you do.”

“Is that so?” John’s amusement was growing by the minute. It almost made up for the frustrating morning he’d had.

“Yes! Don’t you remember when Dorothy Farnsworth and Enoch York were talking down by the river all the time? And then nobody would be happy until they got married?”

Oh, the blessed innocence of childhood. John wouldn’t disturb his perspective on the situation by telling him the truth. “I promise that if you talk to Molly, you’ll be safe from having to marry her.”

Billy didn’t look like he believed it, but he slowly nodded. “All right . . . what am I supposed to say?”

“You’re supposed to say—well, first of all, it would be good to apologize. So you’d better start out by saying, ‘Molly, I’m sorry for chasing you.’”

Billy shook his head. “But I’m not sorry. It was fun.”

And they were right back at the beginning. John exhaled. “I thought we agreed that it wasn’t a good idea.”

“I don’t think *we* agreed on that, Mr. Hall. I think it was all you.”

John shook his head and rested his hand on Billy’s shoulder. “Stay after school, Billy. We’ll talk more later.”

“All right,” the boy grumbled, and John headed back into the school to ring the bell. Just when he’d thought the day had turned a corner . . . It was time to rethink everything.

When school let out, John waited until all the children had filed out of the building before he turned back to Billy, who sat at his desk swinging his legs. “So, Billy,” he began, leaning against the edge of his own desk, “did you have a chance to think about things today?”

“You mean about chasing Molly?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.”

“Well . . . not really. But I wasn’t tryin’ to. Maybe if I’d tried to, but I didn’t.”

“Do you have any feelings about what happened?”

Billy looked contemplative. “Yeah, I feel sad that I had to get rid of that snake. It was a good snake. Maybe the best I ever caught.”

“It . . . it *was* a good snake.” John had dealt with many incorrigible children in the past—this was his fifth year teaching, after all, and he was hardly a novice. However, he’d dealt more with mean streaks than mischief makers, and there was something about Billy that made John want to laugh and send him on his way. He couldn’t, though. He had to address the issue. “And because it was a good snake, it didn’t deserve to be treated that way.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Billy said, his face falling.

“And how do you suppose Molly deserves to be treated?” John pressed, hoping to make his point.

“Well, if she’s gonna go around tellin’ people she’s marryin’ me—”

John held up a hand to stave off the boy’s outburst. “Hold on there a minute, Billy. Let’s think about this for a minute. Molly likes you. Isn’t that a good thing?”

“I dunno. Maybe.”

“I think it’s a very good thing because it means she admires you. There’s nothing wrong with her telling people that, is there? They might start to admire you too.”

“And then they’d all want to marry me!” Billy’s eyes grew wide with alarm.

“No . . . it means that you might make more friends.”

“Oh.” Billy calmed down a little. “I guess that’s not so bad.”

“So maybe we can think of it this way. If Molly tells people she wants to marry you, that means she’s saying nice things about you. She doesn’t deserve to get chased around for saying nice things about you, does she?”

Billy’s shoulders slumped. “No, I guess not.”

John pulled in a breath of air. “All right, then. No more chasing people with snakes—or any other thing. Is that clear?”

“I guess, Mr. Hall. But recess is sure gonna be boring now.”

John had to close his eyes for a few minutes after Billy left. He needed to center his thoughts and regain control. He’d never had to

hop through such a mess of brambles before. One thing was quite clear—Billy had amazing gifts of deflection. He should go into the law someday.

Colorado was absolutely nothing like North Carolina. Christina had never seen such gigantic mountains before, and she felt positively dwarfed by them. She peered out the window as the train pulled into the Denver station, wondering what would happen if the area experienced a large earthquake. Hopefully the mountains would stay where God had put them, but it looked a bit precarious to her.

She stepped off the train and took a deep breath. The train car had become rather stuffy, and she was glad not to be cooped up inside any longer. She was surprised to notice how dry the air felt—she was accustomed to the higher humidity back home.

“Miss Van Pelt?” The conductor approached her, a slip of paper in his hand. “Miss Van Pelt, the baggage handlers need to know if you’ve got a destination in mind for all your things.”

“Yes, I do.” Christina dug in her reticule and pulled out the letter from Mrs. Powers. “I’ll be meeting my friend here, at this address.”

The conductor peered at the letter and nodded. “What I recommend you do is leave your crates here in care of the station until you’ve gotten yourself settled, then send for them. Mr. Abernathy, the stationmaster here, will take charge of them on your behalf.”

“Oh, that’s very kind. Thank you.” That was a worry off Christina’s shoulders. In addition to her personal belongings, she had brought four crates of books and other supplies with her, and it had been quite the experience lugging them all this way. She’d be more than glad to send for them once she had found Mrs. Powers.

She asked Mr. Abernathy to watch over all but one of her things—a bag that contained her necessities and two sets of clothing. She’d feel better having that with her. Then she waved down a small buggy for hire and asked the driver to take her in search of her mother’s friend.

The buildings they drove past looked new, which wasn’t surprising considering that Denver was such a young town. Christina had done a bit of research before embarking on this journey and was excited to visit a place that brimmed with new growth and vitality.

Her hometown had deep historical roots, North Carolina being one of the original colonies, and some of the buildings she visited on a regular basis dated back almost a hundred years.

The buggy pulled up in front of a modest-looking hotel, and Christina paid the driver. “No need to wait,” she told him, and he touched his hat before urging his horse to move onward. Christina’s heart began to thump as she looked up at the building. This would be her home for the next little while—a few months at least, if not longer. Oh, she hoped she fit in here and would be able to make an appreciable difference.

She entered the hotel and approached the desk. A tired-looking older man peered up at her, blinking. “How can I help you, miss?”

“Hello there. I’m here to see Mrs. Agnes Powers, one of your guests.”

The man straightened. “Mrs. Powers, you say? Are you the young lady comin’ here from back east?”

“Yes, I’ve just arrived from North Carolina.”

“Oh, my. Oh, my.” He stroked his chin. “Well now, we may have a little bit of a situation.”

Christina instantly felt sick. “What kind of situation, sir?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Powers left here last week in a bit of a hurry. Seems he finished up his job here and got another one in California. Mrs. Powers was in a tizzy because she’d just gotten a telegram from you sayin’ you were boarding the train that very morning, and there was no time to message you back and tell you not to come after all.”

Christina gripped the edge of the counter as a wave of dizziness overcame her. “Mrs. Powers isn’t here anymore?” she repeated to be sure she understood.

“That’s right, miss. And she felt ever so bad about leaving, but she didn’t know what else to do.” The man opened a drawer behind him and removed an envelope, which he handed to Christina. “She left this for you.”

“Thank you.” Christina took the envelope, then made her way over to a chair in the corner of the lobby. This couldn’t be happening—she’d just traveled across the country alone, sitting up for hours at

night when she longed to be tucked up in a nice warm bed, eating whatever food she could manage to find on the train's short stops, and now she'd been left behind?

She opened the letter, wondering what Mrs. Powers could possibly have to say that would help her, or if it would simply be an apology and a pat on the head.

My dear Christina,

When I received your letter saying you were on your way, followed almost immediately by your telegram saying that you were getting on the train, I was overjoyed. What a wonderful thing it would be to see you again! But then my husband received word that he was urgently needed in California, and I didn't know what to do. There wasn't a way to let you know because you'd already begun your journey, and I've been beside myself.

I went and spoke with two dear friends of mine, Sophia and Sybil Cartwright, who own the Broad Street Boarding House. I met them shortly after I arrived in Denver, and felt an instant kinship with them. They've said they would be delighted to take you in and watch over you when you arrive—their boarding house is clean and beautifully kept, and I know you'll be comfortable there. It will be a safe haven for you until you make arrangements for your return trip back home, and I've paid for your room in advance so it will be ready for you.

My dear, I honestly can't tell you how sorry I am that this has happened. What a startling and disappointing turn of events. I hope you can forgive me, and I hope your trip back home will be quick and uneventful.

Oh, I also sent a telegram to your parents to let them know, and to apologize to them as well. I do hope your dear mother will continue speaking to me after this horrible event.

Agnes Powers

Mr. Powers was urgently needed? He was an architect—why would an architect be needed in such a rush that they couldn't have waited to meet Christina's train and make sure she was all right? It was maddening, disappointing, frightening . . . and so many other things, Christina wasn't sure she could name them all. Perhaps she

should have known better than to put her safety and her future in someone else's hands.

"Miss?" The man at the desk was looking at her curiously. "Can I get you anything, miss? A glass of water?"

"No, thank you," she replied. "I'm all right. I do need to hire a buggy, however—that is, I assume I do. How far away is the Broad Street Boarding House from here?"

"Farther than you'd want to walk," he said, giving a nod. "I'll go out front and flag down a buggy. There's almost always a few out and about this time of the day."

Christina pressed her fingers to her forehead while she waited. She needed a plan . . . She would go to the boarding house, take a moment to rest, and then she would find out when the next train would depart for home. Oh, goodness. She'd told her mother that she might get here, become frightened, and turn right back around again—and that's what she was doing. She'd been speaking in jest, but perhaps she'd somehow known this wasn't going to work.

"Miss? I found you a buggy. It's waitin' right outside."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate your help."

The man put her bag in the buggy for her, refused her offered coin, and waved as the buggy trotted off. Christina clung to the edge of the seat as exhaustion overtook her, willing herself to stay upright. Hopefully this boarding house served tea. She was in desperate need of tea.

This time when she arrived at her destination, she asked the driver to stay a moment in case she was about to be sent away again. She needn't have worried, though. Almost as soon as she knocked, she was let inside by a sour-looking maid, then nearly smothered by the elderly woman who swooped down upon her.

"Oh, Miss Van Pelt! It is Miss Van Pelt, isn't it? Oh, you poor dear! Come in, come in . . . Mary, please go tell the driver he's no longer needed, and give him this." The woman produced a folded bill from someplace in her lace-covered bosom. "And have him bring up any luggage, of course. Sophia! Sophia, she's here!"

"Thank you so much, but I can pay . . ."

Christina's protest was immediately discarded. "You're not to worry about a thing, my dear! Mrs. Powers felt quite upset at having to leave you behind, and she told us to take the very best care of you. Now, come into the parlor and let's have a look at you."

Allowing her hostess to have a look at her also allowed Christina to take the measure of her hostess. She was a merry-looking woman in her early seventies, Christina would guess, who styled her hair high on her head and fastened it with a clip. She wore a gown of deep purple, and her eyes twinkled like stars. "You'll have to forgive me, my dear," she said. "I completely forgot to introduce myself. I'm Sybil Cartwright, and my sister and I run this establishment. Here comes my sister now. Sophia, isn't she precious? Isn't she a gem?"

A woman who looked quite a bit like Sybil, only a little taller and leaner and wearing red, entered the room and crossed the floor to take Christina's hands in hers. "Hello, Miss Van Pelt," she said warmly. "We're so glad you've arrived safely. You were the subject of some very fervent prayers over the last few days."

"You prayed for me?" No one had ever said that to Christina so straightforwardly before, and it caught her off guard. "What . . . what a sweet thing to do."

"We couldn't leave your travels entirely to chance," she replied. "Now, let's have a seat and some tea, shall we? We have quite a lot to discuss and sort out."

"I would love some tea, Miss Cartwright. Thank you." Christina took the offered seat, her nerves beginning to settle now that she knew she was in the right place, even if it was temporary.

The woman held up one finger. "We shall begin with proper introductions. I'm Miss Sophia, and my sister is Miss Sybil. That's the most logical way to tell us apart when referring to us—there are too many Cartwrights otherwise. Our cook is Mary, and you must forgive her for her odd ways—she's rather a grumpy soul, but she does take good care of us. We currently have two other ladies staying with us, Miss Blythe and Miss Andrews. You'll meet them at dinner."

Mary entered the room carrying a full tea tray. Christina wondered how she'd managed to speak with the driver and prepare

tea at the same time. Once the tray had been set on the table, Mary left the room, not speaking a word.

“She’s . . . very quiet, isn’t she?” Christina ventured.

“She doesn’t speak much, but her thoughts are certainly loud,” Miss Sybil replied. “Do you take milk, lemon, sugar . . .?”

“Lemon and sugar, please,” Christina said, although she’d drink it plain by that point. Miss Sybil poured, then handed her the cup and saucer, and Christina drank it gratefully. “Thank you,” she said. “That was needed.”

“I’m sure you’re quite hungry as well.” Miss Sophia indicated the plate of sandwiches on the tray. “It’s impossible to get a decent meal while traveling.”

“Yes, it is. Thank you.” Christina took a sandwich, then settled back in her chair. “I’m so relieved Mrs. Powers arranged for me to stay here. When I arrived at the hotel and found that she’d left, I was quite upset.”

“I can imagine,” Miss Sybil replied. “And if you don’t mind my saying so, I think Agnes Powers should have stayed behind to get you settled instead of chasing off with her husband. She had a duty to fulfill.”

“She didn’t go chasing off after anyone,” Miss Sophia remonstrated. “I do agree, however, that she should have remained behind. Her behavior does seem a bit thoughtless.”

Christina wasn’t pleased with Mrs. Powers’ actions either, but now that she had some tea inside her, she was feeling more forgiving. “Be that as it may, I’m thinking only of a good night’s sleep in a proper bed before I get back on the train. My head hasn’t touched a real pillow in what seems like decades.”

“You poor thing,” Miss Sybil said. “I’m sure you’re just exhausted.”

“I am. I do have some other concerns as well, though—I left rather a lot of things at the train station in the care of Mr. Abernathy. I’m told he’ll see to them until I send word?”

“Oh, yes. He’s completely trustworthy.” Miss Sophia gave a nod.

“I also need to send a telegram to my parents. Mrs. Powers left a

note and said she'd been in contact with them—I don't want them to worry any longer than necessary."

"Of course. I'm sure they're quite beside themselves." Miss Sophia nodded again. "Would you like to handle that personally, or would you like to send someone in your place? Alvin, our gardener, will be coming by shortly, and he's always willing to run those sorts of errands."

Under regular circumstances, Christina would have preferred to send the telegram herself, but the thought of going back out was overwhelming. "If you're sure he wouldn't mind, I'd just as soon send him."

"I thought you would. You look as though you might fall asleep where you're sitting."

Miss Sophia wasn't wrong. Christina gave her a smile. "You figured me out."

"Have another sandwich, dear, and then we'll show you to your room," Miss Sybil said. "You'll find a writing desk there to prepare your note for the telegraph office, and we made sure to have our fluffiest pillows ready for you."

Christina took another sandwich, but it was the pillows that most held her interest.

After she finished eating, she followed Miss Sophia up the stairs and to the room nearest the staircase. "Here you are," Miss Sophia said. "Mary already had your bag brought up, so you should be set."

"Oh, it's lovely," Christina replied. The room was decorated in a theme of roses, and she detected the scent of them as well.

"Just ring this bell when you've finished your note, and Mary will take it straight down to Alvin," Miss Sophia went on. "Dinner will be served at six, but if you're too tired to join us, Mary can bring up a tray for you."

"Miss Sophia, thank you so much." Christina felt her throat growing tight as she spoke, the way it always did when she was just about to cry. "I don't know what I would have done . . ."

"There, there," Miss Sophia said. "We don't need to worry about the what-ifs. You're here, you're safe, and now you may rest. We'll

work out the details later—Alvin will stop by the depot and tell Mr. Abernathy your new whereabouts, and he'll also find out the train schedule for you. Everything is well in hand.”

Christina nodded, too grateful to speak.

After Miss Sophia left the room, Christina sat down at the writing desk in the corner and took out a sheet of paper. She didn't see any ink—just a pencil—so she picked that up and contemplated what to write.

Arrived safely. Lovely boarding house. All is well.

She wanted to say more, much more, but telegrams were expensive. She'd have quite a bit to tell her parents when she arrived home, but for now, assuring them of her safety was the most important thing.

A glance at the time told her it was one in the afternoon. That would allow her a lengthy nap before dinner—that sounded heavenly. She rang for Mary, gave her the note along with some money, and asked if she could be awakened an hour before dinnertime. Then she took off her shoes, let her hair down, and slipped into her nightdress. The bed was every bit as soft and cozy as it looked, and she was asleep nearly as soon as she covered herself up.

Ever since John had stopped by the general store to ask Mrs. Harris about various shades of red and crimson, she had viewed him as some sort of bosom friend, confiding in him about all sorts of things. He'd had no idea that his seemingly innocent question would bring about such interesting results, but he found it amusing.

He had stopped by the store to purchase some candles for his mother when Mrs. Harris bustled up to him, her face bearing that expression she always got when she had something very important to say.

"You'll never guess, Mr. Hall!"

"You're right—I probably never will. You'd best tell me."

"The Cartwright sisters have a new guest all the way from back east, and she's come here to teach, and for a long while, they thought she might be lost, but she's actually not lost. She arrived on the train this very day all safe and sound. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yes, very." John paused, his hand resting on the edge of the candle shelf. "She's come here to teach?"

"Yes, although at first, they thought she might be lost."

"I see." John nodded slowly. He didn't see at all, but if he said so, Mrs. Harris would try to explain it again, and he didn't think that would be altogether helpful. "Yes, that's very good news. I'll take a dozen candles, please."

Mrs. Harris's hands flew as she tied the candles in a piece of brown paper. She'd obviously been doing this sort of work for some time. "I told Miss Sybil to be sure to bring the young lady here when she arrived so I could tell her how very glad I am to meet her. Can you imagine, traveling all that way alone? I could never do it. I really never could. I would likely die of fright the first day. That would be a mess, wouldn't it? Such a disaster."

"Yes, indeed." John took the bundle from her. "Could you please mark that on my account? I'm in a bit of a hurry . . ."

"Oh, of course. I most certainly will. You have a good day, Mr. Hall!"

John shook his head as he left the store, his thoughts in a muddle. A new teacher? He hadn't heard anything about this. Yes, he'd been struggling with the class this year—he'd managed to get Billy somewhat in hand, but a few of the other students were acting up, and it was taking all John's creativity and firmness of mind to keep things under control. Had the school board found out about this? If he was being replaced, why hadn't they said anything?

As he walked toward the house he shared with his mother, he thought about the service he'd given to the school over the last five years, how he was his mother's only source of support, how he'd passed up more lucrative offers so he could keep her living in her home instead of carting her off somewhere else. He'd given up a lot. He'd even experienced the loss of a fiancée—she decided she wanted a richer man. Everything he'd been through, everything he'd sacrificed, and now he was being replaced?

He needed more information. He needed to get this resolved. Pausing in the middle of the sidewalk, he weighed his options. Mr. Hannigan, the president of the school board, was out of town at the moment. The other members lived several blocks away. However, the boarding house was just around the next corner. He could pay a visit and learn from the horse's mouth, as it were, everything he needed to know.

Resolute, he spun on his heel and headed over to Broad Street.

When he rapped on the door, he was let into the house by Mary, who only grunted when he said hello to her. She showed him to the parlor, then disappeared. She didn't even reply when he inquired about the new teacher from back east.

A moment later, he heard the chatter of feminine voices, and Miss Sophia and Miss Sybil entered the parlor like a pair of bustling hens.

"Oh, Mr. Hall, it's so good to see you," Miss Sybil said. "We understand you're here to visit Miss Van Pelt—we had no idea she had any acquaintances in town. We thought she was quite a stranger here."

"I haven't actually met Miss Van Pelt as of yet," John replied. "I just heard of her a few moments ago."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Miss Sophia said. "Please, do sit down—Mary will fetch some tea—and explain how it is that you've never met this young woman, and yet you've come calling. You realize, Mr. Hall, that making new friendships is always a positive endeavor and we already consider you a very respectable young man, but we have a responsibility to our boarders, and we must see to their best interests at all times."

"Of course, Miss Sophia," John replied. "And I don't mean to cause you any alarm. I was just down at the mercantile speaking with Mrs. Harris, and she said there was a new teacher in town. I became curious."

"I see. So you're not here for romantic reasons? You're here to speak with a colleague?"

John smiled a bit under Miss Sophia's scrutiny. "Yes, exactly. I've no reason to pay a romantic call—I've never met the young lady, and I have no idea of forming any sort of attachment to her whatever."

"I'm certainly glad to hear that because it would be a shame to disappoint you."

John came to his feet and whirled around at the sound of the merry feminine voice behind him. He wasn't expecting to see long blonde curls or bright blue eyes or a pleasant smile—he'd been picturing a dour middle-aged woman in a black dress and her hair scraped back into a tight bun. "I didn't mean . . . That is to say . . . Um . . . You must be Miss Van Pelt. I'm John Hall. It's nice to meet you."

"Hello, Mr. Hall. It's nice to meet you too." She crossed the floor and took a seat on the chair opposite his, and he sat as well. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop as I came in, but now I'm wishing I'd overheard just a bit more. All I know of you so far is that you have no intention of falling in love with me. Perhaps you could tell me what your intentions actually are?"

John cleared his throat, wishing the tea had already arrived. "I was just telling Miss Sophia and Miss Sybil that I understand you're a teacher."

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm the schoolmaster currently, and I came to inquire . . . Well,

that is . . . You see . . .”

Miss Van Pelt blinked. “Mr. Hall, I can see that whatever you’re trying to say, it’s upsetting to you. I’m not an easy person to offend, and so I suggest that you simply say it. The odds of you hurting my feelings are fairly slim.”

She was both beautiful and reasonable, a combination John found quite appealing. He swallowed again. “Very well, I shall say it. Miss Van Pelt, have you come here to take over my school? Yes, things have been a bit rough in patches since the beginning of the year, but I assure you, I have everything in hand. Furthermore, it’s most disingenuous of the school board to go about hiring someone without even telling me of it. I would even go so far as to call it dishonest. After the investment of my time, the sacrificing of my potential future, the loss of forward momentum—I could have been a professor by now—this is all very troubling.”

“Mr. Hall, I understand that your feelings are riled, but I must insist that you soften your tone,” Miss Sophia remonstrated. “I’m sure Miss Van Pelt knew nothing of this, and raising your voice at her can’t possibly be fair.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Van Pelt,” John said. He shouldn’t have allowed his feelings to take over—he never shouted, and he wished he could take it all back. “I shouldn’t blame you for my own misfortunes.”

Miss Van Pelt lifted a hand. “Mr. Hall, I understand. You’ve no need to apologize. When I lost my teaching post a while back, I’m sure I raised my voice plenty of times to anyone who would listen. But there’s been a misunderstanding—you’ve no reason to be so upset.”

Mary came into the room just then and placed a tea tray on the table. Without even asking, Miss Sybil poured a cup and pressed it into John’s hands, and he sipped it gratefully. “Here,” she continued. “Have a cookie.” She all but placed it in his mouth for him.

“I look that out of sorts, do I?” he asked her once he’d swallowed.

“My dear boy, indeed you do. Have another cookie, and a bit of cake while you’re at it. We’ll get you set to rights again.”

He nodded, then took another sip of tea. “Tell me, Miss Van Pelt,” he said, his voice calmer now. “What sort of misunderstanding have

we had?"

"I'm not here to take over your spot at all. I'm not employed by the school board—they have no idea who I am. I came here at the behest of a friend who lived here for a short time and was saddened to see so many children heading off to the mines instead of attending school. She thought I might offer my services as a tutor during the evenings so the families wouldn't be forced to choose work over an education."

John sat back and regarded her with astonishment. "You came all this way to offer your services?"

"Yes. I thought I might be able to do some good."

He opened and closed his mouth a few times, searching for words. "I apologize again, Miss Van Pelt," he said at last. "Not only did I raise my voice unfairly, but I completely misjudged everything about your situation. I admire what you're doing—what a noble and needed endeavor."

She smiled. "Thank you, but I'm not so noble after all. My friend has moved on, and without her sponsorship, I'll be returning home. I plan to leave tomorrow, or whenever the next suitable train is scheduled."

"But . . . your idea! It's brilliant and inspired. I've tried over and over again to reach out to the mining families, but they rely on their children's income for their very survival. I'd honestly never thought of an evening program, but now that I've heard of it, I want to help. You can't leave, Miss Van Pelt. I'll gladly help you all I can, and you'll make a huge success of it."

"Have another cookie," Miss Sybil said, pressing one into his hand.

"I'm sorry. Am I becoming loud again? I only mean to express my enthusiasm for the project."

Miss Van Pelt looked as though she was trying not to laugh. "You do express your feelings very clearly, Mr. Hall. One never needs wonder where they stand with you. I'm glad you like the idea, and it would be wonderful to have your help, but you see, I came here with the understanding that I'd be watched over by my mother's friend,

and now that she's gone, I . . . well, I don't know if it's proper for me to stay. I have no connections here, no references—it's such an awkward situation."

"I understand," John said, even though he didn't. Society's rules for young ladies seemed so restrictive at times. If Miss Van Pelt were a man, she could make this decision on her own. However, if she were a man, John wouldn't be noticing the way she folded her hands on her lap, the way she tilted her head when she spoke . . . But none of that mattered. They were discussing other things at the moment.

"It seems to me that while your original plans have changed, you've been presented with new opportunities," Miss Sophia said as she poured out tea for everyone else.

"What do you mean, Miss Sophia?" Miss Van Pelt asked.

"Well, you came here with the belief that you'd be watched over by Mrs. Powers," Miss Sophia went on. "She's no longer here, but she gave you into our care and keeping, and if you don't mind a moment of pride, I do believe our establishment is fully four times nicer than the hotel she was living in."

"And we'd take better care of you," Miss Sybil chimed in. "I don't believe either of us has any plans of running off to California!"

"True, true," Miss Sophia said. "We're quite settled where we are."

"You're saying . . . you think I should stay?" Miss Van Pelt looked uncertain.

"I think it's a valid option," Miss Sophia corrected. "You're of age, you've got a good head on your shoulders, and you've stated that you wish to do some good here. None of that has changed—only the sponsorship of Mrs. Powers. You have us now instead—I believe you could, if you chose to, proceed with your plans."

"And you have a willing assistant," John added. He badly hoped she'd stay. Not only would the children benefit, but he wanted to get to know her—and for her to become better acquainted with him, his true nature. He hadn't made a good impression of himself so far, and he wanted the chance to set that right.

"I . . . I honestly don't know what to say," Miss Van Pelt replied after a long moment. "This isn't a decision I can make so quickly—I

should think about it overnight at least, perhaps longer.”

“Oh, certainly,” Miss Sophia said. “You should take as long as you need. In the meantime, Mr. Hall, I believe dinner is nearly ready. Would you like to join us?”

John came to his feet. “Thank you, Miss Sophia, but no—my mother’s expecting me. And these candles I promised to bring.” He’d almost forgotten his parcel and bent to retrieve it from where he’d placed it on the floor. “Miss Van Pelt, it was a pleasure to meet you, and I hope to see you again soon. Miss Sybil.”

Both women nodded at him, and Miss Sophia saw him to the door.

“I’m terribly sorry for all that,” John said. “I don’t know what came over me—you know I’m not usually so ill-tempered.”

“I didn’t see it as ill temper,” Miss Sophia said. “I saw it as passion about your subject. We need more people of passion in this world, Mr. Hall. They are the ones who innovate and invent. We just also need them to speak a little more softly in our parlors.”

He grinned. “Thank you, Miss Sophia. Have a good evening.”

“And you too, Mr. Hall.”

He heard the door click behind him, and he headed down the path to the road, his grin still spreading across his face. Now instead of being angry, he was enthused—he couldn’t wait to hear what Miss Van Pelt decided. Of course, if she left, he could still see about tutoring the children in the evenings on his own, but it would certainly be a great deal more fun to do it with a pretty companion.

Christina had never liked being awakened abruptly, and she was a bit put out when Mary rapped on her door and told her she had a visitor. Then when she arrived in the parlor and was met by a young man who had come specifically to accuse her of stealing his job—that didn't sit well either. Now, that same young man had entreated her to stay, and the Cartwright sisters seemed to think it was a good idea . . . Or perhaps it was their idea, and he'd agreed. She didn't remember exactly how it happened. All she knew was that her head ached, and she couldn't possibly make any decisions that night.

She asked Mary to bring up her dinner tray, knowing she'd be terrible company if she joined the others and tried to socialize. Then she changed back into her nightdress and lay down, hoping to find the blissful slumber that had been stolen from her.

But of course she couldn't sleep because her thoughts were so jumbled.

She was too tired to get up and make a list, as she ordinarily did when something was bothering her. Instead, she'd make a list in her mind—that ought to help.

In favor of returning to North Carolina, of course, was being reunited with her parents. In addition, she had a comfortable home, a few good friends, a dependable routine, and security. Yes, she'd always felt secure at home—she was protected.

In favor of staying in Denver, she would have the opportunity to teach again, which was something she missed terribly. She would meet new people and have new experiences. She would become more well-rounded. The Cartwright sisters would certainly watch over her. And because this was an honest assessment, she had to admit that she wouldn't mind getting to know Mr. Hall a bit better. Yes, he'd been brash at first, but he'd settled down after a little while, and he was rather pleasant to look at.

Denver would give her the chance to establish her independence and to test out her true abilities. However, was that worth the possible risk of her security? Yes, the Cartwrights would have her best interests

at heart, but did they have the power and the influence needed should she come up against any real trouble? Not that she thought she would . . . she was just trying to see things from all angles.

As they'd discussed in the parlor, she didn't have to make her decision immediately, and that was good because there was far too much to analyze. She also realized that she could choose to stay for a limited amount of time—say, two weeks—and then return. That sort of compromise might work very well.

The determining factor in all of this would be her ability to do what she had come here to do—teaching the children. Was that still possible? Were her services even wanted? Without Mrs. Powers to start the wheels turning, would she be rejected? It would be such an incredible shame to have come all this way and then to discover that she'd be better off back at home anyway, with no choice in the matter.

If anyone could help her figure that out, it would be Mr. Hall. It sounded as though he'd already spoken with the families and knew their situations, and he would be the one to introduce her and present the idea. She was glad he showed enthusiasm for the project—that would certainly make things easier.

With those things decided, it was easy to construct a plan. She would send a note around to Mr. Hall in the morning asking if he would be willing to introduce her to the families with school-aged children. She wouldn't send a new telegram to her parents just yet to inform them of her delay—perhaps she wouldn't be delayed much after all. Perhaps the families would reject her immediately, and she'd be on the first train after that. She'd message them when she knew a bit more. If she decided to leave, she'd give the books to Mr. Hall, trusting that he'd find a good use for them either in his school or by giving them to the mining families to create some curiosity for future learning.

Now that she'd made a plan, it was much easier to relax, and thankfully, sleep claimed her once again.

“A young lady?” Mrs. Hall peered at her son through spectacles as thick as window panes. “You met a young lady?”

"I did, Mother, but it's not what you might think," John told her as he placed the candles in the cupboard. "She's only here for a short time."

Mrs. Hall wagged her finger. "That's what they all say . . ."

"All of whom, Mother?"

"The people who think they're only here for a short time!" She gave a nod. "Mark my words—she'll stay."

"What makes you so certain?"

"It's a feeling. A feeling in my bones. Not my rheumatism—that's a different feeling. This one says that things are finally going to change for you, John. The one you've been waiting for is finally here."

John blinked. "I didn't realize I was waiting for someone, Mother."

"You might not have realized it, but you were. Oh, sure, you can tell me all you want that you're happy being unmarried and living here with me, but I know better! I might not see too well anymore, but I see more than you think!" She wagged her finger again. "Young men need wives. Young women need husbands! It's the way of the world, the way things should be, and she's finally here!"

John didn't know if his mother was having another of her spells or if she was merely excited about the newcomer to town. He'd hope she was just excited—he didn't know what else the doctor could do for her if she was ailing again. So much had already been tried.

"What's for dinner, Mother?" he asked, deciding that a change of subject was in order. "It smells delicious."

"Mrs. Smith came by this afternoon and helped me chop up some carrots and potatoes. It's getting a little harder for me to tell the difference between my fingers and a root vegetable." She laughed, but John could only pretend at a smile. He wished she'd stop trying to use knives at all. It worried him whenever she got it into her head to mix up something new. Mrs. Smith was the one neighbor she'd allow to help her, and thankfully, that good woman had been very kind when John stopped by and asked her to check in once a day while he was at school.

"Let me know what you'd like cut tomorrow, and I'll take care of

it before I leave,” John said.

“Oh, nonsense. You’re busy enough as it is.”

“I’m never too busy to help you, Mother.”

John sliced some bread to go with the soup, then arranged everything on the table. They bowed their heads to say grace, and then Mrs. Hall returned to their previous conversation. “So, tell me about this young lady. What does she look like?”

John didn’t want to describe Miss Van Pelt—he was actually trying to forget her sparkling eyes and her mischievous smile. But he knew his mother looked forward to his descriptions of the outside world now that her own sight was becoming so limited. “She’s very pretty—she has long blonde hair that was tied behind her neck with a ribbon, and her eyes are blue. I’d say she’s probably twenty-two or twenty-three, but I’ve never been a good judge of age.”

“And is she well spoken?”

John chuckled. “Very. She has a razor-sharp wit, and I feel she could hold her own in any debate.”

“Good, good.” Mrs. Hall smiled. “That’s exactly the sort of wife you need.”

“But she might not be staying, Mother,” John reminded her. “And we don’t know anything about her aside from these few small details—I don’t think it’s wise to be planning a future daughter-in-law when she might prove to be an absolutely terrible person.”

“If she were absolutely terrible, you’d already know it,” Mrs. Hall said. “A person with that many character defects wouldn’t be able to hide them all.”

“True, I suppose, but still.” John spread some butter on his bread. “Let’s talk about you for a change—how was your day?”

“Oh, much the same as always. I did some knitting, and Mrs. Smith came by—I already told you about that. She praised my ability to knit by touch and said that my rows were every bit as smooth as hers, even though I can’t always see them clearly.”

“That’s quite the compliment,” John said. “I know Mrs. Smith prides herself on her knitting.”

“Indeed she does, and with good reason, so yes, I’ll admit that I

was pleased when she said that about mine. It made me feel as though I'd accomplished *something*, at least."

John found himself unable to swallow for the lump that had appeared in his throat. "You accomplish quite a bit, Mother," he said at last. "I'm proud of you."

She reached across the table and patted his hand. "With those candles you brought home, I'll have enough light to choose out the colors for your new winter scarf. I have a whole basket of yarn—I'm just not sure whether we should be looking for blues or browns."

"Winter's still a ways off."

"And it takes a long time to knit a scarf!" She ate her last bite of soup, then stood and turned toward the counter. "Will you pour some water for the dishes?"

"Of course." John wasn't finished eating, but he stood up immediately so she wouldn't try to do it herself. She could fill the kettle with water from the bucket by the door, place it on the swinging arm at the fireplace, and position it over the flames, but he didn't want her trying to fetch it back.

After he'd filled the washbasin, he returned to his bowl. "Mother," he said after a long moment, "don't you suppose we should talk about it again?"

"No." Her answer was quick. "We don't need to talk about it—not now or ever."

"But you need someone here with you—someone who can help you with all your tasks. I don't think it's safe—"

She lifted a hand. "John, I realize I'm getting on in years and I might not be as able as I once was, but I'm still your mother, and I still deserve your respect. I will not have a stranger in my home bossing me around and telling me what to do. Until the day I can no longer see a beam of sunlight coming through my east window, I will live as an independent woman, and that's the end of it. I'm not even going to rely on you overly much, and that's final."

"All right." He'd known that's how she would reply, but he had to give it another go. Every time he left the house, he said a little prayer that she'd be protected until he returned, but he knew it was only a

matter of time before God would need him to put in a little extra action to accompany those prayers. He wouldn't take away her independence for anything, but he also couldn't allow her to endanger herself, and her comment about the root vegetables . . . He winced. "What about a visit to Dr. Sloane?"

"That old buzzard?" She snorted. "No, thank you. I know he's supposed to be the most advanced eye doctor for five hundred miles, but I think his vision's worse than mine."

John couldn't help but smile. His mother did have a way of putting things.

Once the dishes were washed and John had carried the water outside to discard it, he lit a few extra candles so his mother could sort through her yarn. She settled on stripes of blue and brown, which suited him fine—he actually didn't care, as long as the scarf was thick enough to block out the biting Colorado winter winds. Then he began working on his lesson plans for the remainder of the week while his mother knitted, each lost in their own little worlds of thought.

As John sketched out his ideas for combining a study of chemistry with the next day's reading lesson, he found himself pondering everything that would go into creating a learning module for the mining families. First would come the assessment of their education to that point—had they ever attended school, and if so, to what grade? Did they remember what they had learned, or would they need a refresher? He grabbed a new sheet of paper and wrote down his thoughts, adding such notes as, *Is teaching them to read enough, or should we include mathematics? When is the best time for us to come, and after a full day of work, would they even be able to focus on learning?*

He realized that he was using words like "we" and "us." Yes, Miss Van Pelt was very much in his thoughts, even though he'd told his mother nothing would ever come of it. It was obvious that he should include her on his list when the entire plan was hers to begin with, but what surprised him was how natural it felt to think of working alongside her, as though they were partners and had been so from the start.

If she were to leave—oh, he hoped she would stay—but if she

were to leave, he could carry on without her. He'd ask for her approval, lest she somehow catch wind of it and think he'd stolen the idea. That is, if he got the chance to say goodbye to her. The thought of her leaving without giving him that chance made an ache start to grow in his chest, and he shook his head at himself. It was ridiculous that he was allowing himself to become so attached to a woman he'd only spoken to for a few minutes that afternoon, but there it was, the truth of it, and he was enamored whether he'd planned to be or not.

Mary filled the bathtub for Christina the next morning, and she felt much restored after a good soak. The other boarders had already left by the time she came downstairs for her bath, and that made her feel like a wastrel—they were going to think she was lazy. She'd be sure to come to dinner that night and meet everyone so they'd have a better opinion of her even if she did end up leaving town shortly. She knew that it shouldn't matter, but she did care what others thought when it came to her work ethic and character.

After she dressed, she had a cup of coffee and a muffin, then climbed the stairs again to write a note for Mr. Hall. Alvin, the gardener, was due to come back that morning, and she hoped he wouldn't mind delivering it. He was likely weary of being made the errand boy, but she did appreciate his help so much. Once that was taken care of, she returned to the parlor, where she had noticed a bookshelf. Perhaps there would be something there to catch her interest while she waited to hear from Mr. Hall.

As she looked over the selection of books, she heard the doorbell ring, and a young woman's voice just a moment later inquiring about a room. Mary showed the girl into the parlor, then left, most likely to alert the Cartwright sisters that they had a new guest.

"Hello," Christina said, straightening from her crouched position in front of the bookcase. The girl turned, looking a bit startled. "I'm Christina Van Pelt. I'm sorry if I caught you unaware."

"Oh, that's all right," she replied with a small chuckle. "I'm little jumpy today, I think. I'm Lydia Swain." She gave Christina a nod.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Swain. What has you so jumpy? If you don't mind my asking, that is."

Christina's question was interrupted by Miss Sophia and Miss Sybil coming into the room, holding out their hands in welcome. Lydia smiled in return, but then burst into tears.

"Pardon me—I'll be upstairs in my room," Christina said, attempting to make a graceful exit, but Lydia turned to her, shaking her head.

"Please stay," she entreated. "I need . . . I need . . . I need all the friends I can possibly get!"

Miss Sybil and Miss Sophia looked at each other with concern, then looked over at Christina. Whether she wanted to be or not, she had just been made part of the welcoming committee.

"Have a seat, dear, and Mary will bring some tea," Miss Sophia said, showing the girl to the sofa.

"And of course, we must hear all about your troubles," Miss Sybil added.

Lydia sat where she was told, then pulled out a handkerchief. From the looks of it, she'd been wiping her eyes with it quite regularly for some time—it was wadded up and sodden. Christina pulled out one of her own and pressed it into the girl's hand.

"Thank you." Lydia wiped her eyes again. "Well, you see, I've just been tossed out of my house by my own father because he believes the same thing Raymond Jenkins believes, but it's not true, and they're both wrong, even if that . . . that brute insists that they're right, but I'm the one who should know, shouldn't I? But no one will believe me, and now I have nowhere to go, and if you don't believe me, you probably won't want me either, and I'll have to sleep in the barn!"

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I didn't catch a word of that," Miss Sophia said. "Could you please try again—perhaps a bit slower?"

Miss Sybil looked surprised. "You didn't understand? It was just as plain as anything!"

"Then I'll have you explain it to me later. But first things first—here comes the tea."

Christina felt very much in the way, so she decided to make herself useful by pouring out the tea. And maybe she could help clear things up for Miss Sophia's benefit. "What is the brute's name, Lydia?" she asked gently.

"Fred. Fred Walker. And I've never met a man with more hands in my life."

"Oh, really? How many hands does he have?" Miss Sybil asked, abounding with curiosity.

"It's likely more a matter of what he *does* with those hands,"

Christina said, glancing at Miss Sophia and wondering if her explanation was offensive. The older woman didn't seem to find it too shocking.

"I see," Miss Sybil replied, even though Christina wondered if she really did. "Well, Miss Swain, you'll be well cared for here, I promise you. Drink up your tea—you'll feel much better."

Lydia drank her tea, then nibbled a cookie. Then she nibbled another, and another. Christina watched as the color returned to the girl's cheeks. That was a good sign.

"Thank you," she said after she'd finished. "I believe I'll be all right now."

"Good. Now, let me show you upstairs. We have some rules that must be followed . . ."

Christina smiled as she listened to Miss Sophia lead Lydia up the stairs while reciting the policies of the boarding house. She hadn't been given that list as of yet, but she supposed that was because she was there under different circumstances. If she were to stay, she'd be obliged to live up to those standards just the same as anyone else.

She heard a knock on the door a moment later, and Mary answered it. Christina didn't suppose that it had anything to do with her and was just about to return to examining the bookshelf when Mary brought in a folded note.

Miss Van Pelt,

I was delighted to receive your letter. I would be more than happy to visit you at the boarding house after school today to discuss the education of the mining families. Perhaps you'd like to go with me to meet some of them. That might be a useful thing to do. I will arrive at four thirty.

John Hall

Yes, going to meet the families was exactly what Christina had hoped. She gave a satisfied nod, chose two books from the bookshelf, and returned to her room. It was a shame that she had to wait until after school hours to embark on the next step of her plan, but as Mr. Hall was her best resource, she would wait for him. It's what logic would dictate.

What was not logical, however, was the fact that she was looking

forward to seeing him. If anything, she should be regarding it as a necessary inconvenience, but no . . . Her heart rate had increased, and her cheeks felt a bit warm. How ridiculous. She hadn't come to Denver to flirt, and he'd stated outright that he had no intention of falling in love with her. This was business, and that's all there was to it. Besides, she could never find such an overly emotional man *attractive*.

But . . . she did find him attractive. Most illogically.

She shook her head as she settled in to read, thoroughly annoyed with herself. John Hall was a colleague, someone who would help her determine her goals. Six months from now, she probably wouldn't even remember what he looked like—his charming smile, his curly brown hair, or his dark brown eyes. She wouldn't recall any of that—it would blur in her memory, along with the dimple in his right cheek.

She managed to force thoughts of Mr. Hall from her mind and concentrate on her book. She had just reached the first paragraph of chapter two when a light knock sounded on her door, and she opened it to find Miss Swain on the other side.

"I hope you don't mind the intrusion, Miss Van Pelt," she said. "I was just hoping . . . well, I was hoping to get to know you better. That we might become friends, considering that we're both on our own in the world at the moment."

"Yes, we are, aren't we?" Christina held the door open and invited her visitor to enter. "And please, call me Christina."

"Lydia," the girl replied. She took a seat on the chair near the window and clasped her hands on her lap. "Oh, Christina, whatever shall we do? We're as orphans set adrift on a raft on the sea in a storm, no kith or kin to call our own . . ."

Christina had to fight the sudden urge to laugh. "I imagine that our circumstances aren't quite that dire," she said. "Let's think about them logically, all right? You said your father made you leave home. What did your mother say?"

"She passed away last year," Lydia replied. "So you see, now I truly am an orphan."

"No, you truly are not," Christina replied. "You're at odds with your father for the time being, but I can't help but feel a reconciliation

can be made.”

“I don’t know . . .” Lydia turned toward the window and gazed outside. “It’s as though my soul has been pulled from me and cast into the deepest well . . .”

“Are you fond of literature?” Christina asked, making a guess.

“Oh, yes. I read almost constantly. Reading is my only solace when the world goes dark.”

“I suspected as much. And what sorts of things do you like to read?”

“Dramatic things, mostly—and pirates. I do enjoy reading about pirates.”

Christina hid another smile, then crossed to her bed and picked up one of the two books she’d brought upstairs. “Why don’t you have a rest this afternoon and give this one a try?”

“Does it have pirates?”

“No, but it has an optimistic outlook, and I believe that’s what you need right now.”

“I suppose I could give it a try.” Lydia took the book, but she appeared doubtful.

“And as for your next step, do you have any means? Should you be considering a job?”

“I have a little money, but I don’t think it will last long. I will be cast onto the street, unable to pay my board . . .”

“Nonsense. No such thing.”

Lydia blinked. “I . . . I beg your pardon?”

“I can’t imagine either Miss Sophia or Miss Sybil forcing you to leave, destitute and orphaned or not,” Christina replied. “And there’s no sense in daydreaming about it. You must find a job, something sensible, and put your hand to it. In the meantime, your father will likely come to his senses and fetch you back home. Raymond will realize he’s never loved anyone but you, and as for Fred . . . well, Fred will have to face his own judgment day, but it will come, and you will be vindicated.”

“I will?” Lydia looked enthralled by the idea. “Oh, thank you, Christina! How can I ever repay you for the hope you’ve given me?”

“Read the book, and then get a job,” Christina replied.

“Oh, yes! I will!” Lydia came to her feet, her face wreathed with smiles, and left the room.

Christina sank into the chair, shaking her head. Gracious—what an exhausting conversation that had been. This was why she chose uplifting reading materials for her students, why they needed stories that inspired them. It wasn’t healthy to get lost in such overwhelming clouds of morbidity.

Christina dressed carefully that afternoon, making sure her hair was neat and her shoes were shiny. She wasn’t fussing over her appearance for Mr. Hall—no, it was important that she make a good impression on anyone they happened to meet while they were out. If he happened to think she looked nice, that would be a nice side benefit.

When she came downstairs, she found Mary and Miss Sybil already in the parlor.

“Now, you know we have strict rules for our residents, Miss Van Pelt, and it’s all for their own good,” Miss Sybil said. “We’re aware that Mr. Hall is coming for the purpose of speaking to you about education—which, frankly, doesn’t sound in the slightest bit romantic to me—but given that he’s a handsome and charming young man and you’re a beautiful and delightful young woman . . . well, we feel you need a chaperone, so we’ve asked Mary if she’d do her dusting and tidying up in here this afternoon. We hope that doesn’t cause you any embarrassment, but we must preserve our reputation for respectability.”

“I understand, Miss Sybil,” Christina replied. “We did intend to pay some calls together—is that going to present a problem?”

Worry creased Miss Sybil’s brow. “Paying calls? In a buggy?”

“I assume so—I don’t actually know how far away our destinations will be.”

Miss Sybil seemed to be considering all the variables. “I believe you’ll be all right,” she said at long last, “but I’d feel much better if you carried an umbrella.”

“An umbrella? I thought the skies looked clear today—at least, they did from my window.”

“Oh, it’s a lovely day. But an umbrella makes a splendid weapon for fighting off the amorous advances of young men.”

“Are you saying you’d like me to hit Mr. Hall with an umbrella?” Christina was both amused and horrified at the idea.

“Only if he requires it,” Miss Sybil said, looking quite sincere. “I don’t believe he will because he really is such a nice young man, but you see, so much of one’s reputation is built upon what others think of you, and if someone were to see the two of you together and you were *not* suitably armed, that might cause the tongues to wag.”

“But . . . carrying an umbrella on a sunny day will keep the gossips from letting loose,” Christina said.

“Yes! Thank you for understanding,” Miss Sybil beamed. “I don’t imagine you traveled with an umbrella, so you may borrow mine. It’s the one in the stand by the door that has a carved handle.”

“I do have one, but it’s in one of the trunks Mr. Abernathy is tending for me at the station. Thank you for the loan of yours.”

A knock sounded at the door, and Mary went to answer it. Christina’s heart beat faster, and she willed herself to breathe deeply. It was silly to go into such a tizzy over a simple meeting.

Mr. Hall entered the parlor and gave a little bow. “Ladies, I fear our plans for this afternoon must be delayed,” he said. He sounded out of breath, and he appeared flustered. “The neighbor who promised to look in on my mother isn’t feeling well today, and my mother is losing her sight and does need a companion from time to time. She generally occupies herself quite safely while I’m at school, but she grows restless by late afternoon and feels she should be more useful, and she tries to use knives or do other things that are dangerous to someone who can’t see clearly. . . I apologize. I’m rambling. Would you be able to meet with me another time? That is, if there is another time . . . Have you decided yet whether you’ll stay or go, Miss Van Pelt?”

“No, I haven’t decided yet,” Christina replied. “My choice depends on meeting the families and gauging their willingness to participate.”

“That’s right . . . You couldn’t possibly know that until you’ve

spoken with them.” Mr. Hall ran his fingers through his hair, making the curls stand up a bit. “I know you’re eager to make your plans, and I’m sure your parents want to know when you’ll be returning, but my mother is restless today, and I feel she’s my highest priority.”

“And that’s exactly how it should be,” Christina said. She was disappointed that they wouldn’t be spending time together that day, but how could she fault the man for caring about his mother’s well-being? She couldn’t fault him at all—it was noble and endearing.

“Well now, I don’t see the need to delay your outing,” Miss Sybil said, folding her hands at her waist. “I’ve known your mother for years, Mr. Hall, and I’d be delighted to visit her this afternoon. In fact, Mary’s been simmering a nice pot of stew all day and we have some lovely bread—I believe I’ll make a picnic basket and we’ll have a splendid time. What would you think of that?”

Mr. Hall blinked, then grinned. “Miss Sybil, that would be perfect. My mother has spoken highly of you, and I know she enjoys your company. I brought a carriage—we can take you on our way.”

“There’s no need,” Miss Sybil said. “I had actually ordered our carriage for this afternoon already.”

Mary made some sort of coughing sound from the corner of the room.

“Inhaled a bit of dust, did you, Mary?” Miss Sybil said, turning to her and widening her eyes.

Christina fought a smile. Just as surely as if Mary had spoken it aloud, she knew Miss Sybil had *not* already ordered the carriage—instead, she was hastening Christina and Mr. Hall on their way.

“Have a most productive time, and don’t forget my umbrella,” Miss Sybil said, waving at them with the tips of her fingers.

Christina gathered up her hat and reticule, which she had placed on the sofa, and joined Mr. Hall by the front door.

“Shall we go?” he asked, opening the door and making a grand sweeping gesture.

“Of course.” She inserted her hat pin through all the proper layers of fabric, securing it in her hair, then followed him down the walk to the waiting buggy. The umbrella was clutched firmly in her right

hand, just in case Mr. Hall were to be seized upon by a sudden fit of passion. "Let's be off."

The buggy wasn't fancy, but it was clean and well maintained, and the horse looked sleek in the afternoon sun. Christina longed to stroke the animal's glossy neck—perhaps there would be time later. She didn't want to delay their trip, knowing the hour was advancing.

As if he could read her thoughts, Mr. Hall said, "I apologize for the humble mode of transportation, Miss Van Pelt. I wanted to hire something a bit nicer, but the stables were out."

"Don't give it another thought," she replied. "It will get us there just as well as a more stylish buggy, and if we were to hit a mud puddle, we wouldn't feel nearly as guilty."

"True." He gave her elbow support while she took her seat, then came around and climbed in the driver's side.

"Plus, I appreciate the fact that it's lower to the ground than most," she continued. "You've no idea what a hassle it is to get into a carriage with all these skirts. Truly, Mr. Hall, men don't suffer nearly as much with their clothing as women do."

"I've never stopped to consider it, but yes, I can see that you're right." He picked up the whip and gave it a slight jiggle, not striking the horse, but making a sound. The horse responded by taking a step forward, and then another, commencing a pleasant trotting motion. "Why do you suppose that is?"

"Hmm?" She'd been lost in the rhythm of the wheels and had forgotten what they were talking about.

"Why are women's fashions so cumbersome, while men's are so much less?"

She looked at him with surprise. "Is this something you're actually interested in, or are you just making conversation?"

He glanced over at her. "Both. I'd like to get to know you better, and hearing your thoughts on this matter would be enlightening."

She sat back, a smirk on her face. "Do you realize, Mr. Hall, that you're the only man I've ever met who has asked for my opinion? As a general rule, I'm encouraged to be quiet, not to speak up."

"Oh? Why is that?"

“You might say that I’m rather . . . progressive. Forward-thinking. Or as one person put it, annoying.”

Mr. Hall laughed outright. “I haven’t seen any signs of that yet, but now I’ll be on the watch. What shall I do when I think you’re being annoying? Shall I wave my hand, or should I just be quiet and endure the torture as long as I can?”

Christina smiled. He had an easy sense of humor—that was refreshing. “Oh, by all means, alert me immediately. If you were to die suddenly from having to associate with me, I’d feel terrible for a long time. Even more terrible than if we hit a mud puddle.”

“Well, we can’t have that.” He grinned at her again. “Guilt is a horrible thing to live with.”

“Agreed.” Christina glanced up at the mountains and wondered if avalanches were a threat. Best not to ask—no sense in scaring herself when she didn’t even know yet if she was staying for any appreciable amount of time. “Tell me about where we’re going.”

“Ah, yes. The miners have set up tents on the outskirts of town. Many of them travel a short distance away, heading out to work at various locations and performing different aspects of the mining process. Some help construct the tracks used to move the coal carts in and out of the shafts. Both gold and coal have been discovered in this area, so you might say we’ve been blessed by nature’s bounty.”

“Do all the miners have families?” Christina enjoyed watching Mr. Hall talk. He was very animated, and she could see the dedication he had to this community. He seemed well versed in what was going on—again, more reasons to trust him as her guide.

“No, not all of them. I’d say maybe a third, but that fluctuates all the time. Some are married, but left their wives and children back in their hometown while they came here to make money.”

“It must be difficult, being separated from their loved ones like that,” Christina commented.

“It’s a difficult life regardless, but yes, the separation does make things harder.” Mr. Hall glanced over at her, his face somber for the first time during their conversation. “Miss Van Pelt, I feel the need to warn you before we reach our destination—these people are in dire

circumstances. Most are here because they have no other alternative. They're hungry, they're tired, they're often dressed in rags, their shoes are in tatters—they work hard for insufficient pay, and they do it day after day because it's the best they could get. You must be prepared to see various different sorts of want and misery.”

Christina swallowed. She hadn't realized the exact nature of their living conditions. “Is there no other help available for them?”

“There are church charities that do their best, and different ladies' auxiliaries, but what these men and women need are jobs with consistent pay. When you're a miner, you're at the mercy of the lode. If you're working independently, as many of the gold miners are, you can go your entire career never making a cent. Mining companies try to stay on top of wages, but if there hasn't been a yield, they run the risk of going under, and that hurts everyone from the upper ranks down to the smallest water boy.”

“And that's why literacy is so important,” Christina said. “If these children knew how to read, they could go about getting better jobs with stable hours and a dependable income. And they would have the freedom to live elsewhere—they wouldn't be confined only to mining areas. They would broaden their opportunities as they learned new skills.”

“That's exactly right,” Mr. Hall replied. He guided the buggy around a corner, then glanced at her again. “Miss Van Pelt, what you're about to see will either make you desperate to leave or committed to stay. You appear to be a woman of great sense and a good heart—I believe you'll choose to stay, but if you feel you must go, I'd like to move forward with the idea in your absence. I'm rather ashamed that my entire focus was on bringing the children to the schoolhouse and that I never investigated bringing school to the children instead. You've opened my eyes, and now I can't see anything else.”

He looked at her with such warm approval, she felt her cheeks begin to redden. “That's a very kind thing to say, Mr. Hall. Of course you may carry on with the idea—it's not as though I'll be offended in the slightest. In fact, it didn't even originate with me. Mrs. Powers

thought it up. It's a shame she's no longer here to see whatever the results might be."

"I'm sure you could write to her."

"Yes, I'd like to. I hope she lets us know where she's gone." And perhaps by then, Christina would feel less irritated at being abandoned, and she would have only kind words to write instead of chastisement.

Christina looked up ahead and saw tents in the distance. Some looked newer than the others and were obviously in better repair while some were tattered and seemed barely upright, sagging between their poles.

"Do all the miners live in tents?" she asked.

"No, some live in boarding houses or cheap hotels. Tents are the least expensive way to live, though."

Mr. Hall drove the buggy along the edge of the tent town until they reached a hitching post, where he brought the horse to a stop and tied the animal up. There was a water trough nearby, and the horse helped himself while Christina climbed down to join Mr. Hall on the dusty ground.

"You've been out here before, then?" she asked, glancing around. The tents were set up in rows, but there were no numbers on them or any way to distinguish one from another. She supposed you'd have to ask for specific directions to find any particular person.

"Yes, a couple of times. Hoping to invite the children and whatnot. Let's start over here with Gertie Brown." Mr. Hall gestured to the right, and Christina took the lead. She felt a bit silly clutching Miss Sybil's umbrella, but she'd promised she'd take it along, and she wasn't about to break a promise to sweet Miss Sybil.

"And who is Gertie Brown?" Christina asked as they walked. "Is she one of the mothers?"

"She's actually one of the grandmothers. She watches over the children who are too young to go into the mines, and she takes in laundry and dispenses advice. I'd say she knows more about this community than anyone else." Mr. Hall nodded. "That's her tent up there."

Christina noticed a clothesline stretched between a couple of tent poles, and a few toddlers trying out their feet in the shade of some dangling laundry.

“Hello,” Mr. Hall called out as they approached. “Mrs. Brown, are you at home?”

A woman with frizzled gray hair stuck her head out of the tent, then came out, a mixing bowl resting on her hip. “It appears that I am. Hello, Mr. Hall. What brings you by this afternoon?”

“Mrs. Brown, I’d like to introduce you to Miss Van Pelt. She’s come all the way from North Carolina in hopes of teaching the children of your community how to read. She’s donating her services and will be available after work hours for the convenience of the families.”

Christina gave a wide smile. “Hello, Mrs. Brown. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise, I’m pretty sure, but hold on there a moment.” Mrs. Brown thrust her mixing bowl into Christina’s hands and trotted over to save one of the children from putting a rock in his mouth. Christina shifted her umbrella and tried not to drop her unexpected new burden.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Brown said, returning with a child on her hip where the bowl had been. “This one thinks everything is food. Can’t blame him—he’s a growing boy. Now, what was this about reading and so forth?”

“I’d like to volunteer my time to teach anyone who’s interested how to read,” Christina said. “I’ve brought ever so many books and learning materials from home, and I’m eager to meet with all of you and help you in any way I can.”

Mrs. Brown pursed her lips. “It’s like I was telling Mr. Hall here before—we don’t have a lot of time for things like that. Those of us who aren’t out working at the crack of dawn are working here at home—we’re making bread and we’re washing clothes and we’re trying to keep the babies from eating rocks. We don’t have time to sit around reading novels and kicking up our heels—we have to see to our survival. And come nighttime, all we can think about is getting

some sleep before it starts up again the next day.”

Christina felt the sting of rebuke, but she also recognized that Mrs. Brown didn’t mean to be unkind. She was stating facts, and those facts weren’t pleasant. “I realize that I don’t understand the full extent of your lives, Mrs. Brown, but I’d be interested in whatever you’d like to tell me,” she said.

“You’d be interested in learning more about us?” Mrs. Brown looked incredulous. “Oh, wait.” She thrust the child she was holding into Mr. Hall’s arms and went chasing after another one, who had picked up a stick and was poking a skinny-looking chicken with it.

Christina expected Mr. Hall to recoil or look uncomfortable holding the child, but she was amused and impressed to see him settle the boy in his arms and began speaking to him.

“You have a knack, Mr. Hall,” she said.

He shrugged. “I’ve always enjoyed the company of children. And how are you getting along with your mixing bowl?”

Christina looked down at her arms. “Well, it hasn’t started crying yet, so I’m going to take that as a positive sign.”

“Yes, that’s very positive indeed.”

Mrs. Brown came back, mopping her face with the edge of her apron. “Sorry about that. Now, where were we . . . ? Oh, yes. You were saying you want to learn more about us. Well, Miss . . . Um . . .”

“Please, just call me Christina.” There were times when “Van Pelt” was too cumbersome.

“Miss Christina, I can’t imagine that we’d be of any interest to you. What you see is what you get.”

“Denver is very different from my home in North Carolina, so yes, I’m quite interested. Just look at these mountains! And all the varieties of trees! It all makes me wish I knew how to draw so I could send pictures home to my parents.”

“You’ve got folks still living back there, then? I thought you must be an orphan if you were willing to come all this way.” Mrs. Brown finally retrieved her mixing bowl, and Christina was relieved.

“Yes, both my parents are still living. I came because I believe that learning how to read is the best way to give someone opportunities in

life, and I can't think of a better way to spend my time."

Mrs. Brown gave her mixture a few more stirs, then threw in a handful of flour from a sack on the table behind her. Then another handful, and she began to knead. "Once upon a time, I used to enjoy reading," she said. "Then my father caught me with a book and spanked me with it. Told me I'd never be able to eat a book or milk a book or make clothes out of a book, so what good would it do me? I've never picked up another one since."

Christina glanced at Mr. Hall. The child he held was engrossed in playing with Mr. Hall's necktie. It was quite charming.

"As an adult, do you feel that your father was right?" Christina asked carefully. She knew she was challenging this woman's beliefs, and she needed to be sensitive. She wasn't here to belittle anyone—she was only here to find those who wanted what she had to offer.

Mrs. Brown didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, "He was a mean man who would take away happiness from anyone he didn't like. And he didn't like me, that's for sure."

Christina didn't reply. She sensed there was more coming, if Mrs. Brown were given a chance to consider her feelings.

"I would have liked to keep reading," she said at long last as she gave her dough a final thump. "I wonder if I still remember how."

"It would be easy enough to find out," Christina said.

Mrs. Brown shook her head. "It's like I told you. I don't have time for that. Someone's got to take care of things around here. We've got mouths to feed—something better than rocks."

Christina understood Mrs. Brown's sentiment, but she'd also seen the spark of light in her eyes as she spoke about reading. She missed it.

"What if . . . what if I were to find a way, Mrs. Brown? What if you had thirty minutes once in a while to spend with me, thirty minutes when you weren't chasing children or making bread?"

Mrs. Brown lifted one eyebrow. "You some sort of magician? How are you going to conjure up thirty whole minutes like that?"

"I'm not a magician, but I do have a few tricks up my sleeve," Christina said with a smile. "Just give me the opportunity to try."

Mrs. Brown tossed a towel over her mixing bowl, then wiped her hands on her apron. "I'll have to think about it," she said. "It's all fine and good to have dreams, Miss Christina, but you've got to look at reality too."

Christina nodded, but she also pressed her lips together. Oh, it was so tempting to launch into a speech about the importance of dreams, but she'd promised herself that she'd learn when to be more circumspect with her opinions, and this woman needed to be understood for herself. "Tell me about the other families here," she said, feeling that it was time to shift the topic to a broader scope. "Do you think they'd like to speak with me?"

Mrs. Brown reached out and took the toddler Mr. Hall had been holding. The child gave up his grip on Mr. Hall's necktie with some reluctance. "Oh, you might as well try everyone. I can't promise you'll get a lot of takers, but at least they'd have the chance to hear the idea. There's a bunch of them coming home in about ten minutes, if you want to wait around."

Christina looked over at Mr. Hall, who nodded. "Yes, I think that would suit us well," he said. She was glad he chimed in—she had no idea if the buggy was being rented by the hour, or how long he felt comfortable leaving his mother, or how late it might be when they got back.

Mrs. Brown nodded. "Well, I'll tell you what. If you get some folks interested and you end up coming back out here, sure, I'll see about some lessons too. But they can't interfere with my other duties, and I'd like to know what your ideas are for lightening my work load a bit."

"I don't actually have any ideas yet, but I'll come up with some by the next time you see me," Christina promised.

"Fair enough."

"I'll take Miss Van Pelt on a walk around the area while we wait," Mr. Hall said. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Brown."

"Just hope it didn't prove to be a waste."

Christina and Mr. Hall stepped out of the doorway of the tent and began their stroll. As soon as Christina felt sure they were out of earshot, she turned to Mr. Hall. "Mrs. Brown seems to have a natural

negative streak in her. Are we going to encounter that a lot?"

Mr. Hall lifted one shoulder. "Possibly. These are some of the hardest-working people I've ever met, and sometimes at the end of the day, they're too exhausted for much else. Jeb Astle, though—he's one of the cheeriest fellows on the planet, I'd wager, and if we timed our visit right, he'll be arriving home shortly."

"Does he have children?"

"No. He's unmarried. I met him in town when he came in to get his horse reshod. We fell to talking just right there on the street—I can't remember about what now, but I do remember how much he made me laugh."

"I hope Mrs. Brown has the chance to meet up with him from time to time. I think she needs that sort of break in her day."

"I agree."

They came to a stand of trees with a fallen log set up on stumps to form a bench. Christina took a seat and pulled her fan from her reticule. "How long until the autumn weather sets in, Mr. Hall?"

"Oh, about another three weeks or so." He sat down next to her and placed his hat on his knee. "Until then, we'll enjoy plenty of warmth and sunshine."

"And how long of autumn before it snows?"

He chuckled. "Now, that question is harder to answer. Every so often, we might get snow in the middle of the summer—not that it lasts. It can snow in the morning and melt away by early afternoon. That's not common, though. It usually starts to accumulate in October and melt away in April, with the most snowfall in March."

"And . . . how much snow?" Christina cringed inwardly as she asked.

"Oh, I'd say around fifty inches for the year, give or take."

Christina almost dropped her fan. "Fifty inches?"

"That's right. How much does it snow where you're from?"

"Less than a foot," she replied. "A person could sink into a snowdrift and never be found again with fifty inches of snow, Mr. Hall. Small children could be separated from their parents—and what about the dogs and cats? Just walking along and then all of a sudden

—gone!” Not to mention avalanches . . .

He chuckled. “I take it the idea is somewhat frightening to you.”

“It’s not only frightening, but foolish! You should put a stop to it immediately.”

“You’d like me to stop making it snow so much?”

“If you could, I’d be ever so grateful, Mr. Hall.”

“I wish I had that sort of power.” He smiled, then turned to face her a little more directly. “Miss Van Pelt, I do wish you’d call me John. We’re becoming friends, aren’t we?” His eyes looked somber, even though he still wore a smile.

“Of course we are, and I’d be glad to call you John.” She held out her hand as though they were being introduced for the first time, although they hadn’t actually shaken hands then. “And I’m Christina.”

He encased her fingers with his and said something, but she didn’t hear what it was because as soon as they touched, she felt a tingling sensation rush up her arm and to her very scalp. What was this feeling? She hadn’t noticed any such thing when he’d helped her into the buggy—this was new and different, and almost alarming.

He released her hand, stood, and turned away. She didn’t know why at first—was he upset with her for some reason?—but then she noticed people walking toward the tents, and she realized the miners were home from work. Mr. Hall—er, John—was merely standing to greet them. She tried to push down her disappointment. Once she’d overcome the initial surprise of her reaction to his touch, she’d looked forward to something else—perhaps talking about something more personal than the weather.

But it was possible that he didn’t *want* to talk about anything more personal. Perhaps asking to use their Christian names was meant out of friendship, as he’d stated—and friendship only. That’s how it should be, though. She shouldn’t have any desires for more, not until she’d made up her mind about whether to stay. She stood up as well, preparing herself to greet the families and tell them why she’d come. That was the most important thing she could be doing, not worrying about this man standing beside her, this handsome practical stranger whose opinion was starting to matter more to her than it really

should.

The moment had passed far too quickly—the moment when John had touched Christina’s hand and felt the world stop its spinning. How had she come to affect his life so completely in such a short amount of time? It didn’t seem possible, and yet, it was real. If the miners hadn’t arrived back from work to interrupt them, he might have said something ridiculously sentimental, so in a way, he had been spared from embarrassment, but at the same time, he could have sat there with her forever, just holding her hand.

“I see Jeb Astle,” he said, nodding toward one group walking toward the northern row of tents. “I think he’d have encouraging words for us.”

“Yes, let’s speak with him next. I’d very much like to meet him.” Christina gathered up her reticule and umbrella—why was she carrying an umbrella?—and then followed him toward Jeb’s tent.

Jeb hadn’t gone inside yet and was chatting with another man when John and Christina walked up. “Well, if it isn’t my friend the schoolteacher,” he boomed, his deep voice seeming to rattle around inside his massive chest. “What brings you out this way? And with such a lovely companion?”

“Jeb, this is Miss Christina Van Pelt. She’s a teacher from North Carolina.”

Jeb gave Christina a deep gentlemanly bow. “It’s a pleasure to know you, Miss Van Pelt. I’m curious what a lady from way back east is doing here in our humble little town.”

“As Mr. Hall said, I’m a teacher, and I’ve come to see about teaching the children of your mining families how to read,” Christina replied. John thought she perhaps looked a little intimidated by Jeb’s height and breadth, but her voice didn’t show any signs of nervousness, and she’d soon see that Jeb was as gentle as a cub, although he might be the size of a bear.

“How to read, hmm?” Jeb stroked his beard and turned to the man standing next to him. “What say you, Frank? You’ve got some little ones running around here somewhere—would they like to

learn?”

Frank looked to be about twenty-seven or twenty-eight—old enough to have school-age children, but still young enough that hopefully he’d be open to new ideas. “Maybe. They work, though—they carry water in the mine, and we need their income.”

“I understand perfectly, sir, and that’s why I’d like to schedule our classes after work. That way, they can receive the education they need, but their wages wouldn’t be interrupted.”

“I’ll have to talk to the wife about it,” Frank said. “Usually when we get home, she sets the children right to helping with dinner.”

“I’ll look forward to hearing her thoughts,” Christina said, giving him a nod, and John escorted her to the next tent.

The man there said he didn’t take up with women being educated, and since he had a daughter and no sons, there was no reason to be talking to him. Christina muttered something under her breath as they walked away.

“What was that? I didn’t catch it,” John said.

She turned on her heel and looked at him. “It wasn’t very nice. I don’t think you want to know.”

“I actually do.”

She let out a puff of air. “I find it ridiculous that a man would be so short-sighted as to neglect the education of his daughters simply because they weren’t born as sons. This world would not have made the progress it has without strong mothers guiding and shaping their children not only in ways of mortal fortitude, but in their education. When a woman sits down with a child on her knee and opens a book, she is all but guaranteeing a better life for that child than they would experience otherwise. I want to go back there and grab that man by the beard and dunk his head in the rain barrel.”

“And I would enjoy the spectacle, but I don’t think that’s the way to convince these families of your plan,” John replied.

Christina’s shoulders slumped. “Of course you’re right, but it would be so satisfying.”

They continued down the row, speaking with fathers and mothers all along the way, but the responses they got were similar—there

wasn't time, it wasn't important, the children were needed at home. At almost every tent, John caught sight of children peering out from behind their mothers' skirts or looking up from mending or cooking, and he noticed the spark of interest on their faces before it was snuffed out by their parents' refusal. It was heartbreaking.

It was the second-to-last tent that finally yielded a positive answer. A young woman with two children aged seven and nine said she'd like them to learn how to read, but could she maybe learn along with them? Christina looked overjoyed as she said yes, and plans were made for her to return the following evening.

The sun had nearly set as John and Christina walked back to the buggy. John wondered if the trip had been worth the while, but the bright smile on Christina's face was most definitely worth it.

"So, I heard you promise that you'd come back tomorrow," he said as he helped her into the buggy. "That means you're staying—you can't come back again if you're leaving."

"That's right," she said. "As we were walking along, I told God that if even just one person said yes, I would stay. I asked for that to be my sign that I was doing the right thing, and . . . well, you see the result."

"What if that young woman said yes all on her own, and God had nothing to do with it?" John wanted to know.

"I could just as easily stay all on my own, couldn't I?" Christina gave him another smile. "I prefer to give God the credit for it. I'd rather praise Him too much than too little, and is there any such thing as too much?"

John shrugged good-naturedly. Yet another thing he'd never really considered—Christina was certainly making him think. Wherever the credit truly belonged, she would be staying. And *that* was something to be thankful for.

As they drove back toward town, Christina studied the names of the young family who had agreed to be tutored. Annabeth Hobbs was the mother, and Clarie and Isaac were her children. The class wouldn't be large, but she would give them every bit of her effort and attention

just as though she was preparing to teach a room of thirty.

“You look pleased,” John commented as he urged the horse onward.

“Oh, I am. Today wasn’t a huge success, but it was just big enough. When a teacher doesn’t have anyone to teach, it feels as though all the purpose has gone out of life. But you’re a teacher—I’m sure you understand exactly what I’m saying.”

He didn’t reply for a moment, and she wondered if he’d missed her comment because of the noise of the buggy wheels. Then he said, “Teaching has always been my life, but in truth, I’ve considered giving it up a few times this year.”

“You have? Whatever for?” She didn’t mean to exclaim, but she was so taken aback, she had spoken loudly. “I’m sure it was something rather distressing,” she added, hoping that would soften her reaction.

“It’s hard to say. I’ve always gotten along with my students so well—a day or two of learning more about each other, and then we were off and running for the year. This time around, though . . .” He paused. “I can’t seem to bring all the pieces together. There’s one boy, a bit of a scoundrel, who makes me laugh and frustrates me at the same time, and even a year ago, I would have handled him with ease. This year, I find myself struggling more than I should.”

“But you do still love teaching,” Christina said. “You were quite upset when you thought I’d come to take your post.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I was, and I apologize again for that. I do love it. I’ll always love it. I just don’t know if I’ll always be good at it.”

“Well, if you don’t mind my saying so, it sounds like you’re giving up awfully fast,” Christina said. “School hasn’t even been in session that long and you’re already questioning yourself? It takes at least a month to get into a good rhythm at the start of the year, and if it’s only taken you a couple of days in the past, you were lucky.”

“Lucky, hmm? And all this time I thought I was remarkably talented.”

“I’m sure you are—but you’re also lucky.”

He chuckled again. “You’re probably right, and thank you for setting me straight. I should stop complaining and simply do my job,

shouldn't I?"

"Something like that, yes."

He glanced over at her, a thoughtful look on his face. "I wonder . . ."

"Hmm?"

"I'm sure I'm asking far too much, but would you be willing to visit my school tomorrow and give me your honest opinion?"

"What?" She couldn't believe what he'd just said, and she laughed aloud. "You'd like *my* opinion—my loud, brash, judgmental, and often unguarded opinion? Why would you subject yourself to that?"

"Because I'd like to know what you think."

How was it possible that she'd known this man for the space of one day and he already appreciated her input, whereas there were men back home she'd known her entire life who rolled their eyes whenever she opened her mouth? "You're a rather peculiar sort of man, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe I am, but what makes you say so in particular?"

"You just continually surprise me. Yes, I'd enjoy visiting your school. Thank you for the invitation. I'll come by after I've sent a telegram to my parents, and I also need to arrange for the delivery of my things from the train station."

"Thank you, Christina. You're doing a great deal to set my mind at rest."

"I do warn you that I have no talent at all when it comes to displaying tact. If I think something is wrong, I'll say so."

"And that's exactly what I want."

A very nice change of pace indeed.

When Christina arrived back at the boarding house, she found Miss Sybil and Miss Sophia in the parlor with a few other ladies, including Lydia Swain. The younger women looked deep into a game of cards.

“Oh, hello, Miss Van Pelt,” Lydia said, glancing up from her hand. “Did you have a nice afternoon?”

“Yes, we must hear all about it.” Miss Sybil put down her embroidery. “I imagine you’ll want something to eat first, though. We never serve food after mealtime, but we made an exception in your case, and Mary has a plate ready for you in the kitchen.”

“Never mind all that nonsense about mealtime,” one of the ladies said. “They serve food whenever someone’s hungry. I’m Geraldine Blythe. It’s nice to meet you, Miss Van Pelt.”

“And I’m Tamara Andrews.” The other woman nodded. “After you’ve eaten, why don’t you come join us? This game is much more fun with four players.”

“Yes, I’d like that. I’ll come back in a few minutes.” These women looked cheerful and intelligent, and it had been a long time since Christina had done anything with friends.

She went up to her room, took off her hat, and washed up. Then she went downstairs to find her dinner. The food was delicious—baked chicken with sprinkles of rosemary, boiled potatoes, fluffy bread, and a peach crumble. She ate twice as fast as she would have at home. Her father didn’t believe that one should inhale one’s food, but she couldn’t help it. She was so hungry, and this food was worthy of inhalation.

Once she’d finished, she placed her dishes on the counter, then made her way back into the parlor.

“Sit here,” Lydia said, patting the seat next to hers.

Christina sat and accepted the cards that had been dealt for her, then looked over her shoulder toward the sofa where the Cartwright sisters sat. “How was your afternoon with Mrs. Hall, Miss Sybil?”

“It was delightful. I helped her put some stew over the fire, we

made bread, and we chatted about nearly everything we could think of—most particularly, you.”

“Me? Why were you talking about me? I’m hardly interesting.”

“Oh, but you are, my dear. You’re the first young lady Mr. Hall has mentioned at home for quite a long time.”

“But that’s only because of the project. It doesn’t mean anything, and I’d hate for his mother to think otherwise.”

Miss Sybil made a tsking noise. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that, my dear.”

Christina turned back to her cards, but she could barely focus on what she held. She wanted to think John’s interest in her went beyond teaching, but she wouldn’t get her hopes up just to have them dashed.

“You haven’t told us about your day,” Miss Sophia said. “How did you get along with the miners?”

Christina turned around again, causing her tablemates to be a little disgruntled with her. “I signed up Mrs. Hobbs and her two children. They’re the only ones so far, but that’s enough for me to get started.”

“So you’re staying?” Miss Sybil said, her face lighting up.

“Yes, I am—that is, if you’ll have me. I’m sorry—I should have asked that right off. I’m just rather tired, and then I was distracted by my delicious dinner . . .”

“That’s quite all right, my dear. Of course you’re welcome to stay, and we’re glad to have you,” Miss Sybil replied. “When I think of all the lives you’ll bless by being here, it makes me happy clear to my toes.”

A loud banging sound echoed through the foyer just then, and the ladies all startled.

“What on earth was that?” Miss Sophia asked. “It couldn’t possibly have been a knock—no one would knock on a door in such a raucous manner at this hour of the night.”

“Yes, someone would,” Lydia said, coming to her feet. “My father.”

Mary opened the front door, and a large man came charging into the parlor, his face red and his clothing unkempt. “There you are!” he

said, pointing a finger at Lydia. "Been lookin' everywhere for you. It's time you came home."

"Came home? But you told me to leave!"

"Well, I've been thinkin' about that. If you confess and own up to your wrondoin's, you can come back home, but only if you promise never to do it again."

Lydia folded her arms across her chest.

"Good evening, Mr. Swain," Miss Sophia said, rising and taking up a stance between Lydia and her father. "May I offer you some tea?"

"Don't drink tea," he said. "But if you had any whiskey, I'd take some."

"I'm sure you can guess, sir, that we are not the sort of establishment that serves whiskey," Miss Sophia said. "With that out of the way, may I ask what exactly Miss Swain is accused of doing, this thing she should confess before she may be permitted back into your glorious presence?"

Christina had to press her lips tightly to keep from laughing aloud. Mr. Swain, however, didn't seem to notice the slight.

"Well, Fred Walker, see . . . He says she and him . . ."

"What about them, Mr. Swain?"

He pulled his hat from his head. "Well, if you aren't the sort to serve whiskey, you likely aren't the sort to wanna know what she and him were doin'."

Miss Sophia straightened to a greater height. "Mr. Swain, I may or may not be that *sort*, as you say, but Miss Swain is in my keeping at the moment, and I'm entitled to know what accusations are being leveled against her. And by whom she is accused."

"It's just that . . . well, Fred says he knows more about her than a gentleman ought to know about a lady." Mr. Swain's face was beet red by now, and Christina believed that was exactly what Miss Sophia was hoping for.

"Fred Walker is no gentleman, Mr. Swain, and so he has no grounds to make that statement." Miss Sophia crossed her arms in front of her stomach. "Miss Swain, have you and Fred Walker been doing anything you shouldn't?"

“No, ma’am. We haven’t even been doing anything we should. I don’t spend much time with Fred Walker, ma’am. I don’t like him at all.”

Miss Sophia nodded. “There you have it, Mr. Swain. She has stated her innocence, and I believe her. Not only does she sound like a truthful girl, but I don’t like Fred Walker either.”

Mr. Swain turned an even deeper shade of red, but this time, it seemed to be coming from anger and not embarrassment. “Not meanin’ you any disrespect, ma’am, but I think this is between me and my girl. Come along now, Lydia.”

Miss Blythe and Miss Andrews were on their feet now, and Christina joined them in creating a wall of support for Lydia. “Do you want to go home with him?” Christina asked the girl in a soft tone.

“No, I don’t. He threw me out—he shouldn’t have the right to toss me back and forth like this.”

“I agree. So, tell him,” Christina said.

“Tell him you agree with me?”

Christina shook her head. “No, tell him you’re not coming home.”

Lydia pulled in a deep breath. “I’m not sure I’m brave enough.”

“Yes, you are. You can do this.”

“What are you doin’ over there, yammerin’ your heads off? Come on home, girl. You’ve been gone too long.”

Lydia turned toward her father. “I’m not coming home. You told me to leave, so I did.”

“But now I’m tellin’ you to come back!”

“I don’t think so, Father. It’s time for me to make up my own mind once in a while.”

“But . . . but . . .” Mr. Swain looked like a pot on the stove ready to boil over. “How’re you goin’ to take care of yourself? You don’t have a job or anythin’!”

“She’ll be just fine, Mr. Swain,” Miss Sybil interjected. “In fact . . . in fact . . .” She didn’t seem to know how to finish that sentence, but then her eyes began to twinkle. It appeared she’d had a moment of inspiration. “She got a job this afternoon.”

“She did?” Mr. Swain didn’t seem to believe it.

"I did?" Lydia looked at Miss Sybil, confusion all over her face.

"Yes. She'll be working as a companion to a very respectable lady here in town who could use her assistance. She'll be quite well taken care of, Mr. Swain."

Christina couldn't help but grin. What a marvelous way to solve two problems at once.

"And what about Raymond?" Mr. Swain looked back at his daughter. "What are you going to do about Raymond?"

"There's nothing to be done," Lydia replied. "He said he wasn't marrying me, so now I'm not marrying him. I'm going to work for this lady and be very happy doing it."

"Well, now. You've got an answer for everythin', don't you?" Mr. Swain shook his finger. "I'm tellin' you, missy, this sort of rebellion won't get you anywhere."

"I'm not rebelling, Father. I'm doing exactly what you and Raymond told me to do. I left home, and I'm not getting married." Lydia offered a final nod.

Mr. Swain had run out of words to say. He spun on his heel and stomped from the room, slamming the front door behind him when he left.

"Goodness," Miss Sophia said. "I see no reason why he had to take his feelings out on our poor door. That pane of glass was shipped here all the way from New York City, and replacing it would be expensive and inconvenient."

"He didn't break it, did he?" Christina asked.

"No, but he certainly could have." Miss Sophia turned her attention from the foyer back to the gathering in the parlor. "Now, it seems to me that you have a card game to finish."

"We never started this hand," Miss Blythe said. "Miss Van Pelt kept getting sidetracked."

"Miss Sybil, I'm so confused." Lydia sat down with a thump. "Do I really have a job? And who's this woman who needs my help?"

"Now we never *will* finish this hand," Miss Blythe muttered. She wasn't being unkind about it, though—she seemed to recognize the humor in the situation.

"I believe you'll have a job if you want one," Miss Sybil said. "The woman is the lady I visited today, Mrs. Hall. She's losing her eyesight. She still has a very independent spirit and wants to do as much for herself as she can, but she really shouldn't do anything with knives or the fire or the hot stove. Mostly she just needs someone to be her friend."

"I could do that," Lydia replied. "I don't have a lot of other skills, but I am a good friend."

"Then I'll write to her son about it immediately," Miss Sybil said. "I think you'd be an excellent match."

"I'll be going over to the school tomorrow morning," Christina said. "Would you like me to take him a note?"

All the heads in the room turned.

"You're going to the school?" Miss Sybil clasped her hands under her chin. "Oh, that's so romantic!"

"That's the first time I've ever heard going to school called 'romantic,'" Miss Andrews said, her tone wry.

"Oh, but it is," Miss Sybil said. "Yes, Miss Van Pelt, that would be appreciated. I'll have the letter ready at breakfast."

With the hubbub of the evening quieted down, the ladies finished their game of cards, and then they bid each other goodnight. Christina's mind was in a whirl as she prepared for bed. She'd decided to stay, she'd made some new friends, she had three students, she had so much to do the next day . . . and she was going to see John again. This time she would study him closely to see if she could detect any clues about his feelings for her. If he didn't seem to care for her, she'd rein in her feelings immediately, and they would just be friends and business associates. If he showed the slightest bit of caring, she'd show some as well, and then depending on his response . . .

Oh, gracious. Why did relationships have to be so tricky? It would be much easier if she could ask him outright, but her father would be mortified, and her mother would likely faint. They already went through quite a number of smelling salts at home—hopefully she'd do nothing to increase that quantity even more.

“How was your day? And how is Miss Van Pelt?” Mrs. Hall asked the moment John entered the house.

“Hello, Mother,” he said with a chuckle, bending over to kiss her cheek. She was sitting by the fireplace knitting his new scarf, and things in the house looked tidy. He could smell stew, but the kitchen was clean. “My day was fine. How was yours?”

“I had a nice visit with Sybil Cartwright. You know Sybil, don’t you? The younger one who wears so much purple.”

“Yes, I do know Miss Sybil. She’s always fun to talk to.”

“She chatted with me for quite a while, and then she felt bad for taking up so much of my time, so she helped me get dinner started to make up for it. Are you hungry, or did you eat while you were out?”

“I’m very hungry. I thought about buying Miss Van Pelt some dinner, but I was eager to get home to you.”

“That’s a sweet boy, but as you can see, I’m fine. You could have enjoyed a meal with your lady friend.” She set down her knitting. “And just how did things go for Miss Van Pelt today? Did she meet the mining families?”

“She did, and she now has three students.”

Mrs. Hall frowned. “Only three? Why not more?”

John sat down and loosened his necktie. “Most are afraid of losing their income if they take too much time away from work. I think some are afraid of things changing. I really hope that as Christina makes regular visits and they get to know her, more people will show up.”

“I’m sure she’ll be able to win them over.” Mrs. Hall settled back in her chair. “So, this means she’s staying.”

“Yes, it does.”

“And how do you feel about that?”

“I’m grateful. I think she’ll be a blessing here.”

Mrs. Hall let out an impatient sound. “Are you going to be so mean to your poor mother? I’ve been waiting all day to find out if you’re falling in love with this girl, and now you’re acting like it’s of no consequence.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying not to get my hopes up too high. It’s a terrible thing to be floating around on a cloud and then to fall to the

earth with no warning.”

“It’s terrible to fall, but the floating is wonderful.”

“Yes, that’s true.” John thought about how it felt to walk by Christina’s side, to hear her thoughts and to catch a glimpse into her heart. The more time they spent together, the more impressed he was by her. She seemed to think he was going to find her overbearing in some way, and she’d warned him that she could be opinionated, but so far, he’d only found her interesting and thought-provoking. And beautiful, yes—very beautiful.

He was floating. But how long until he fell?

“I was up all night thinking about things, and I do hope Mrs. Hall likes me,” Lydia said to Christina over their morning muffin and cup of coffee. “It’s time that I stood up to my father and took charge of myself—he’s got to understand that.”

“I have Miss Sybil’s letter to Mr. Hall right here, and I’ll put in a good word for you as well,” Christina replied. “I’m sure things will work out.”

“Oh, I hope so.” Lydia took a sip of her coffee, then said, “I was thinking about something else, too . . .”

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” Miss Blythe said from across the table. “What was it?”

“I think I only agreed to marry Raymond because it’s what my father wanted. I don’t think I ever actually loved him at all.”

“Then it’s just as well that he called off the wedding,” Miss Andrews chimed in. “For all you know, this event could have been a blessing in disguise.”

“You’re right. I might not have found the courage to call off the wedding myself.” Lydia smiled, seeming to have found a bright spot in the gloom.

Christina finished her muffin, then stood. “Wish me luck, ladies.”

“Are you going by yourself?” Miss Blythe asked.

“Miss Sophia offered to come with me, but I want to wander around on my own a bit and see some of the town. I shouldn’t get up to anything too scandalous between the telegraph office and the schoolhouse, should I?”

“No, but once you *get* to the schoolhouse . . .” Miss Blythe said, and the other ladies laughed.

“Where we’ll be surrounded by children.” Christina shook her head, even though she was smiling. She didn’t mind good-natured teasing, and it was so nice to have friends.

After gathering her things, she headed out into the bright morning, enjoying the scents of the trees and the flowers she passed. She didn’t know if they carried a stronger aroma than the flowers back

home or if she was simply noticing them more, but they added to her happy mood.

Once at the telegraph office, though, she found herself flummoxed. “How do you tell your parents that you’re going against their wishes and staying in a place where you weren’t supposed to stay without your specific mentor, but that mentor is gone now?” she asked the woman behind the counter.

“Oh, my. That would take a lot of words,” the woman replied. “Mrs. Murphy, can you come for a minute?”

Another woman bustled up to the counter from somewhere in the back. “Yes, Mrs. Greely?”

“This young lady needs help composing her telegram. It seems that she’s not where she’s supposed to be, but she prefers it that way . . . or something along those lines.”

“You’re not far off,” Christina said with a smile.

Mrs. Murphy frowned. “And who are you sending this to?”

“My parents.”

She frowned even more. “If you’re not where you’re supposed to be, the first thing they’ll want to know is that you’re safe. As for all the rest of it, that sounds far too long of an explanation for a telegram. I suggest that you tell them a letter is on its way with more details.”

“Oh, that’s just excellent, Mrs. Murphy. Just excellent.” Mrs. Greely turned to Christina. “Will that suit?”

“Yes, it will.” Christina picked up the pencil that lay on the counter and wrote, *Will be staying for now. All is well. Letter to follow with more details.*

Mrs. Greely took the note and read it. “If you changed this to ‘detailed letter to follow,’ you save two words,” she suggested. “If we can keep this to ten words, it’s the most affordable.”

“Yes, that’s true. All right . . . how about this?” She crossed out a few things and gave the note back.

“Hmm. ‘Staying for now. All is well. Detailed letter to follow.’ Ten words exactly.” Mrs. Greely smiled. “Wonderful. I’ll send this off right now.”

With that errand accomplished, Christina walked over to the train

station, where she met with Mr. Abernathy and asked him to send her things over to the boarding house. He also gave her directions to the schoolhouse, her next destination.

As she walked, feeling the anticipation of seeing John again, she saw a livery stable up ahead, and an idea began to form in her mind.

“Excuse me,” she called out as she entered the double doors of the business.

A man wearing a black leather apron stepped out from behind one of the wagons. “Yes, miss? How may I help you?”

“Are you the proprietor?”

“I am. Name’s Jerry Wilcox.”

“Mr. Wilcox, I’m Christina Van Pelt, and I’ve come here from North Carolina to teach the children of the miners how to read.” She’d given her introduction so many times now, she wondered if she’d start saying it in her sleep. “I’ll be starting a small class this evening, and I’m very excited about it. I just have one small concern—transportation. You see, I’m staying at the Broad Street Boarding House, and I have no horse or buggy of my own. They have one, but I don’t think it’s used often, and I hesitate to ask to use it. Then I saw the sign for your business, and I wondered if you’d consider sponsoring my program.”

Mr. Wilcox tilted his head to the side. “Sponsor? What do you mean, Miss Van Pelt?”

She realized she was asking a lot, and she almost told him never mind. But she took a deep breath and plunged in anyway. “Would you be willing to lend me a horse on the evenings when I have class? I would be happy to tutor your children in exchange.”

“You want to borrow a horse? Just how often are you talking about?”

“A couple of times a week, most likely.”

“And do you mean a horse and buggy, or a horse and saddle?”

“Saddle,” she answered quickly. He was more apt to agree to that, and she’d been riding since she was four. She was no stranger to horseback.

He rubbed his face. “And I’d be getting what in return? In

addition to the tutoring.”

“I’d tell everyone that you’re my sponsor, and they should come here to rent their buggies and nowhere else.”

“Hmmm.” He shook his head and seemed about ready to tell her no, but she leaped in again.

“I realize I’m being very forward, Mr. Wilcox, but please understand my position. I’m volunteering my time to help these children because I believe in the cause of education so very much, and if you were to lend me a horse, you’d be assisting the next generation right where you live. Those children could grow up to be the lawmakers of this territory.”

“We’re fixin’ to become a state,” he replied.

“And there you have it—those children could become the governors or the senators of this state. And you would have helped them achieve it.”

He let out a breath. “You know how to make a good argument, Miss Van Pelt. All right, you may use a horse and saddle two evenings a week, free of charge, if you’ll spread the word about my business. As far as tutoring my children, I don’t have any children, so we’ll just have to skip over that part.”

“Oh. I should have asked . . .”

He waved. “Never mind. Just send folks on over to Wilcox’s Livery.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wilcox. Investing in education is never the wrong choice.”

He waved again, this time in dismissal, and she left the livery feeling even more fulfilled. Things were coming together most splendidly.

John had just finished writing the day’s spelling words on the blackboard when the door to the school opened, and a cheery feminine voice said, “Knock, knock. May I come in?”

The children all swiveled to look at Christina, who stood in the doorway. The light was streaming in behind her, and for one unbelievable moment, she looked like an angel. Then she came inside,

the illusion was broken, and John felt ridiculous. She wasn't an angel, but she was certainly coming to mean something special to him.

"Everyone, this is Miss Van Pelt, a teacher from back east. She's here to visit us today."

Joseph, a little blond boy seated in the middle of the room, gasped. "She came all the way just to see us?"

Christina smiled warmly. "No, but I think it would have been worth the trip. What a nice-looking class you have, Mr. Hall."

"Thank you, Miss Van Pelt." He reached behind his desk and pulled out his chair. "Please have a seat."

She sat, and his heart gave an extra beat. She was really here, in his classroom. He wasn't sure if that was comforting or if it caused him to feel additional anxiety.

"We were just getting ready to study our spelling," he said to her, but loud enough for the class to hear. "The younger children are learning the words on the left side of the board, and the older children are learning the words on the right."

"I'll try to be quiet so you all can study," she said, folding her hands on her lap and looking very proper. One of the little girls giggled.

The spelling lesson commenced, followed by arithmetic, and then it was time for lunch. John had moved through each segment of the day with relatively few problems, but it had been hard to concentrate, knowing Christina was right there near his elbow. He wanted to impress her, or at least to do a reasonable job. He could never tell from her expression, though, what she was thinking, and that was frustrating.

The children grabbed their lunch pails from the back of the room and ran outside, and John turned to Christina expectantly. "Well?"

She smiled widely, no longer being overly proper. "I think you're a very talented teacher, and the children seem well-behaved. Of course, you're probably all trying your hardest because you have a visitor. If I weren't here, who knows what sorts of mischief you'd be up to?"

"Then perhaps you should stay," John replied. He had meant the

words lightly, but as soon as he said them, he realized the weight they carried, the meaning they implied, and he meant that too.

“Well, I did just have my things sent up from the train station,” she said. “You might actually see me in a different dress the next time we meet instead of the same two over and over again.”

“I haven’t noticed,” he replied. “You’ve been perfection.”

This time, she did seem to hear the seriousness of his tone, and she met his gaze. “Not perfection. Not by any standard. I have so many flaws . . .”

“As do we all. But it’s the flaws that make things interesting, don’t you think? Imagine a person entirely without flaws. I’d be bored of them within minutes.”

“But you wouldn’t become bored of me?”

This time, she was the one speaking lightly, and he chose to respond seriously. “No. Not ever.”

They held each other’s gaze for a moment, and then she stood, moving over to the open doorway. “How long is the lunch break?”

“Half an hour, but sometimes a few minutes longer if I’m not done preparing for the rest of the day.”

“And your lunch is . . . where? I don’t see a pail anywhere for you.”

He reached into his desk drawer and pulled out an apple.

“No wonder you’re so slim,” she said with a laugh.

“I’ll share,” he offered.

“No, thank you. I stopped by the bakery on the corner and had a pastry—I could smell them from the street and couldn’t resist. Besides, if that’s all you’re eating, how could I possibly take some? You’d waste away to nothing.”

“Oh, I doubt that. I had a hearty breakfast.”

John recognized that they’d fallen into small talk to avoid discussing the other things . . . all the things they should be talking about, but weren’t. She’d moved away from the desk to break the spell, but he didn’t want that spell broken—he wanted to see if there was true magic behind it. He joined her in the doorway, and after a moment of looking out at the children with her by his side, he reached

over and took her hand in his.

"I'm glad you came today," he said simply.

She didn't pull away from his touch, but she did seem surprised, and her voice sounded a little tremulous when she replied, "I was curious to see your school. Also, I should report that I've had a very successful morning. Mr. Wilcox is going to lend me a horse twice a week for my trips out to the tent community."

"He is?" John had never known Jerry Wilcox to be that generous.

"Yes. In exchange, I'm to tell everyone I meet to rent their buggies from him."

John laughed. "Advertising—an excellent trade."

She glanced down at their joined hands, then turned a little, breaking the connection. "You'd best eat that apple before time's up."

"I'm not very hungry." He looked down into her eyes, wondering what she was thinking and feeling. If she walked away again, he wouldn't make her uncomfortable by following—he'd gather up his history materials and get ready for the children to come back inside. But she wasn't walking away. She was looking up at him, and in her eyes, he thought he could see just a glimmer of all the things he was hoping for. But now wasn't the time to ask, and it wasn't the time to act.

They held the moment until loud laughter from the yard distracted them, and they turned to see two of the boys trying to play jump rope with the girls and getting tangled up.

"At least they're making the attempt," Christina said, laughing along with the children. "Oh! I can't believe I forgot!" She turned and walked back to the desk, where she'd left her bag. "I have a message for you from Miss Sybil."

"A message, hmm?" He took the note from Christina and opened it.

My dear Mr. Hall,

Perhaps I'm overstepping my bounds, but I trust you'll forgive me and know that I only mean it with your best interests in mind. Our newest boarder, Miss Lydia Swain, has been ejected from her home by her father, and as she's considered her situation, she's decided that leaving home is

actually the best thing for her. However, she finds herself in need of a job.

After the delightful afternoon I spent with your mother, I feel confident in recommending Miss Swain as a companion for her. The girl would bring some lively energy into the home, and she could continue to live here at the boarding house, so you wouldn't need to worry about finding a place to put her.

If this sounds like a good arrangement, why don't you come by the boarding house at your earliest convenience and meet Miss Swain?

Sincerely,

Sybil Cartwright

John studied the letter, not really seeing the words anymore, as he thought about it. He and his mother had gone back and forth on the topic of a companion so many times, he didn't know if she'd ever relent. He didn't want to force the issue, but with her safety in question . . . He sighed. What else was he to do? He'd chopped several vegetables for her that morning, and he'd sliced some bread and made both tea and coffee, everything he could think of that she might want, and she'd grumbled at him the whole time.

He was running out of ways to allow her to have independence—but it wasn't really independence if he was preparing her food before he left. Independence wasn't a possibility for her anymore whether she had a companion or not, and that was something they were both going to have to accept.

"What's the matter, John?" Christina asked.

John looked up, meeting her concerned gaze. For a moment, he'd forgotten she was even there. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was just thinking about my mother. Why must infirmity make a person's final years so difficult?"

"I wish I had the answer," she replied.

John swallowed a few times as he tried to sort through the issue in his mind. "Tell me what you think of Miss Swain," he said at last.

Christina smiled. "She's a bright, happy girl until the subjects of her father or Raymond Jenkins are brought up. Then she tends toward the dramatic. She reads extensively—pirate stories, from what she tells me. That likely accounts for the drama. Despite that, I would say

that there's a simple straightforwardness about her. I like her quite a bit."

"Do you think she'd be a good companion for my mother?"

"I haven't met your mother, so I can't say, but I do think she'd be a good companion in general."

John shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Would you like to meet my mother?" Christina's answer to this question would tell him a great deal about her feelings for him.

"Yes, John. I'd like that very much."

She met his gaze again and looked as though she wanted to say something else, but John suddenly realized what time it was. "We'd best call the children in—they've been out there five minutes too long."

"I'm sure they didn't mind the extra playtime," she responded.

"I didn't mind the extra time myself." He reached out to take her hand again, but stopped himself midway. "Duty calls."

"Unfortunately, yes." Christina gave him a warm smile, one that said they'd talk more later.

He moved to the doorway and rang the bell, then stepped to the side as the children swarmed in. So much had happened in that thirty-five minutes, although most of it had been silent communication. When school was over for the day, they would need to have a real conversation, one that would confirm everything he was feeling. He couldn't wait to ring the bell for the end of class.

Christina had gone to the school with two objects in mind—to observe John’s class and offer her opinion, and to see if there was anything truly blossoming between the two of them. She’d hoped he’d give her a sign, an indication of what he was feeling, and yes, he most certainly had. It was in the way he looked at her, the way he’d taken her hand, the almost palpable emotional tug she felt toward him—it was impossible that she had imagined it. It was heady and exhilarating, and it was all she could do to wait patiently for school to be over so they’d have the chance to talk more.

When John rang the final bell, all the children left but one—Billy, the boy John had pointed out as the little rascal. He came to the desk and stood in front of her. “Miss Van Pelt,” he said, looking quite serious, “I think you’re the prettiest person I’ve ever seen. If Molly grows up to be like you, I might marry her after all.” Then he spun on his heel and ran out.

Christina laughed. “Oh, goodness. That just made my day.”

“He’s definitely something else.” John finished cleaning off the blackboard, then turned to her. “Shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s. The air in here is rather full of chalk dust.”

“I’m sorry about that. One of the hazards of the occupation.”

They exited the schoolhouse, and John secured the door. “Where to next?” he asked. “Should I escort you home and meet Miss Swain, or shall we go to my house first so you can meet my mother?”

Christina was considering that when she looked up and saw Lydia hurrying toward them. “Here comes Miss Swain now,” she said. “We could all go to your house together and see if she and your mother get on.”

“We could, but she looks as though she has something else on her mind,” John replied.

He was right—as Lydia grew closer, Christina could see that she looked rather excited about something. She called out as she approached, “Christina! You’re needed back at the house!”

“What’s the matter?” Christina immediately became concerned for

the Cartwright sisters. Had one of them fallen down the stairs? But if so, why were they sending for her and not a doctor?

Lydia reached them and paused a moment to catch her breath. "It's your parents! They're waiting for you in the parlor!"

"My parents? Oh, my goodness!" That was truly the last thing Christina would have expected. "Yes, of course I'll come immediately. Mr. Hall, this is Miss Swain, and vice versa. I . . . I need to go." She picked up the front of her skirt and began to walk quickly, just as Lydia had, but that soon turned into a run. Proper young ladies never ran on the street, but her parents had come all the way from North Carolina, and in that moment, she didn't care if she was proper or not. She did slow down as she reached the boarding house, though, lest her parents be standing near a window and be mortified by her behavior.

The moment she entered the house, her mother was there, catching her up in a hug. Christina welcomed the embrace—it felt so good to be reunited. Her father stepped over and gave her a kiss on top of her head, and the Cartwright sisters stood in the background, beaming.

"How . . . Why . . .?" Christina pulled away at last, looking back and forth between her parents. "You're here! How did this happen?"

"Come in and sit down," Miss Sophia said. "I'm sure you'll enjoy your visit all the more if you're comfortable."

They entered the parlor, and Christina saw that tea was already in progress. Of course it would be—Mary would have been dispatched to prepare it as soon as the Van Pelts arrived. Miss Sophia poured her a cup, and she sipped it before asking again, "How did you come to be here?"

"When we got Agnes's telegram, we were terrified," her mother said. "We had just put our precious child on a train and sent her off across the country, and now there would be no one to greet her when she arrived. Of course, we know no one else in Denver, so the best thing to do seemed to be coming after you ourselves."

"We would have been here sooner, but there was some difficulty with the stagecoach line—they'd had a coach break down or some

other thing that put them off schedule. Then it was a matter of waiting for the correct train. I do believe your mother was ready to start walking by the time we were finally on our way.”

“Yes, I was, and I would have done it gladly, too,” Mrs. Van Pelt said. She reached over and squeezed Christina’s hand. “Anything to get to my girl.”

“Then when we arrived in town, we asked the stationmaster if he knew anything of you. He was most helpful in directing us here,” Mr. Van Pelt went on.

Christina’s heart was full to the brim. She just couldn’t believe they’d come—it was so rare that they even traveled. “Miss Sophia and Miss Sybil have taken wonderful care of me, and I’ve been quite comfortable,” she said. “You missed the telegram I sent saying that I was safe—you must have been so worried.”

“Yes, it would have arrived long after we left,” Mr. Van Pelt said.

“And of course, you never received the one I sent this morning because you were nearly here . . . the one where I tell you that I’d like to stay.”

“Stay?” Mrs. Van Pelt looked horrified. “But darling, Mrs. Powers isn’t here anymore. How can you proceed without her?”

“I’ve made great strides already, Mother. Mr. Hall took me out to meet with the mining families yesterday, and I’ve put together a small class of students. We’re scheduled to have our first session tonight.”

“Well, now. That’s certainly good news, but not at all what we were expecting,” Mr. Van Pelt said. “We thought we’d be bundling you back up to take home with us.”

“I did consider leaving, but I told myself I’d stay for the sake of a few students. Now that I have them, I feel quite sure about my decision. I also feel I’m in a much better position here than I would be with Mrs. Powers. Her hotel wasn’t nearly as nice or as homey as it is here, where I have my own room and caring landladies.”

The two sisters hadn’t spoken, but they did seem pleased with her praise.

Mrs. Van Pelt looked at her husband helplessly. “At least she’s all right, dear. That’s what we came to find out.”

“Yes, she’s all right—and she looks happy, too,” Mr. Van Pelt conceded. “We’ve always wanted that for her.”

Mrs. Van Pelt leaned toward him. “Maybe if we stayed a few days, she’d change her mind and come back with us after all,” she whispered.

“I believe your daughter has a stronger will than that, but yes, we can certainly stay and make sure she’s settled,” he replied.

“Your daughter also has exceptionally good hearing,” Christina added, a note of humor in her voice.

“Well, I can hardly be blamed for hoping.” Mrs. Van Pelt gave a little sniff.

The front door opened, and Lydia entered, followed by John. Mr. Van Pelt came to his feet when they stepped into the parlor. Christina felt terrible for dashing off like she had and leaving them there on the street, but she knew they’d forgive her.

“Mother, Father, this is Lydia Swain, one of the other boarders here, and this is John Hall, the schoolmaster. He’s been assisting me in contacting my potential students.”

Lydia gave a small curtsy, but John stepped forward to shake hands. “Mr. Van Pelt, Mrs. Van Pelt. It’s an honor.”

“As it is ours. Thank you for the help you’ve given our daughter,” Mrs. Van Pelt said. “I wonder if more tea could be brought, Miss Cartwright?”

No sooner had she spoken than Mary bustled in with an additional tray.

“Oh, my. That’s quite remarkable.” Mrs. Van Pelt smiled at Mary, who managed a slight nod before retreating.

“Mary sees to our every need,” Miss Sophia said. “Mr. Hall, Miss Swain, would you like lemon, milk, or sugar?”

As Miss Sophia poured, Christina turned to her parents. “Even if I don’t return with you, I’m glad you’ll stay for a few days. We need to discuss your rooms, though—I wouldn’t send you to the hotel where the Powers were staying, so . . .”

“They can stay here with us,” Miss Sybil interjected. “Yes, we only take in female boarders, but as your father is married and is traveling

with his wife, I believe we can make an exception. He mustn't use a cigar indoors, however—we will not budge on that.”

“Thank you, Miss Sybil,” Christina said. She'd been secretly hoping for that, but hadn't dared to ask.

“You're most kind, Miss Cartwright,” her mother said. “I'm sure we'll be quite comfortable here. In fact, if you don't mind, I'd like to see our room straightaway—I've dealt with so many emotions, I'd appreciate the chance to lie down for a while.”

“Of course.” Miss Sybil stood, as did the Van Pelts. Mrs. Van Pelt gave Christina another long hug.

“Come see me in a bit,” she said into her daughter's ear. “I want to hear every detail, and I'll rest better knowing that you're truly all right.”

“I'm very much all right.” Christina returned her mother's squeeze. “I'll be up in a few minutes.”

Miss Sybil led the Van Pelts up the stairs, and Christina turned to the others in the room.

“I just can't believe they came,” she said. “This is such a surprise.”

“What a relief for them to see you safe and sound,” Miss Sophia said. “This is quite the happiest family reunion I've seen in a good long while.”

“Unlike mine last night,” Lydia said. She shook her head sadly. “When my father came in looking like a gale of wind blown from the mouth of Poseidon himself, I nearly died right in my chair.”

John glanced at Christina with a touch of merriment, which she returned.

“But I do have some good news,” Lydia went on. “Mr. Hall and I talked as we walked back, and he thinks I'd do very well as his mother's companion.”

“That is good news,” Christina replied.

“I just need to convince her that a companion is needed,” John added. “Once she meets Miss Swain, I believe she'll like her very much, but she's very determined and set in her ways. It may take some cajoling.”

“She'll know you care about her safety, and that's the main thing,”

Christina said. "I'm so happy for both of you—I have a good feeling about this. People are brought into each other's lives for a reason, or so I've always believed."

"As have I," John replied.

His words carried the same warmth she'd felt from him when they'd spoken at the schoolhouse, and she felt her cheeks begin to grow warm.

Completely oblivious to the moment, Lydia swallowed the rest of her tea and excused herself. Miss Sophia, on the other hand, was very aware of the moment and took out her embroidery, making a silent statement that she wasn't about to leave the two alone.

"You have your first class this evening?" John asked.

Of course he already knew that, but it was hard to come up with things to say when an eagle-eyed chaperone was on the premises.

"Yes, I do. I can't explain how excited I am."

"I can likely imagine. I'd like to ride out with you, if I may—for protection, but also out of curiosity. I'd like to see how you evaluate your new students and glean any tips I can from you."

"Of course. I did only arrange for one horse from Mr. Wilcox, though—that might complicate things."

"I'll figure something out. No need to worry about me." He came to his feet. "I'll go home and speak with my mother, and then I'll return for you in an hour, if that suits."

"Yes. That suits very well."

He gave her a slight bow, wished Miss Sophia a good evening, then left.

Miss Sophia looked up from her embroidery. "I'd wager that young man's smitten."

"You would?"

"Yes, I would. I've seen many a smitten young man in my day, and he's one of them. I must say, I approve. He's one of the kindest boys I've met, and you look well together. Of course, that has nothing to do with compatibility, but it does present a pretty picture when you walk into church together."

"Miss Sophia, are you trying to play matchmaker?"

The older woman raised an eyebrow. “Why, certainly not. I’m only pointing out what’s already in progress.” Then she smiled. “When I play matchmaker, I’m much more obvious about it.”

Christina laughed. “All right then, I’ll admit it—I like John. I like him a lot. I can’t help but wonder, though, if I’ve become attached to him simply because he’s the first young man I met when I arrived here. As human beings, we’re prone to form attachments for reasons such as that, aren’t we?”

“Well, I don’t know about *all* human beings, but I do know that when two people are as similar as you are in your interests and your passions, there’s bound to be a connection, and that often becomes romantic.” Miss Sophia paused. “And of course, he has a dimple . . .”

“Yes, he does.” Christina smiled, her heart feeling light. “Is it possible that I’ve fallen in love with him so quickly?”

“In love? Oh, I don’t know, but the seeds for it have definitely been planted, and with some encouragement, I’m sure they’ll bloom.”

“Thank you, Miss Sophia.” Christina stood. “I’ll go check on my parents, and then I’d better get ready for my class. I’m so excited, even my fingertips are tingling.”

Miss Sophia gave her a nod. “Good luck, my dear, and make sure that your tingling fingertips don’t make you write your letters incorrectly. You’re the teacher, after all.”

“Yes. I am the teacher, aren’t I?” It felt wonderful to say those words.

When John arrived home, he gave his mother a kiss on the cheek, as he always did, then asked her to sit and talk with him for a minute.

“Oh, dear,” she said. “I’m not going to like this very much, am I? Whenever you ask me to sit and talk, it means something bad has happened or is going to happen . . . Unless you want to tell me you’re engaged. Is that it, John? Is it something good this time?”

“I want to bring Christina to meet you, but we’ll talk about that in a minute, all right? I do have something to say that you might not like, but you never know—you might like it after all.”

“And there you are being mysterious. You know I’m not good at solving riddles, my boy. Out with it. Out before I get any older than I already am.”

John took a moment to settle his mind. It was important that he say this exactly right. “I met a young lady today, a girl who boards with Christina, and she’s a very nice girl, Mother. She’s cheerful and has a willing disposition, and I find I like her quite a bit.”

Mrs. Hall shook her head. “I truly hope you aren’t shifting your attentions away from Christina, son. She sounds like your perfect match.”

“No, no, Mother, not at all. I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to hint that I was developing feelings for this other girl.” So much for phrasing it carefully. “Her name is Lydia Swain, and I’d like you to meet her because I feel she’d be a good companion for you.”

“So, we’re back to this, are we?” Mrs. Hall shook her head again. “Son, you know my feelings.”

“I do know your feelings, and I’ve tried to honor them the best I can, but in reality, it’s not safe for you to be alone anymore—at least, not for long stretches of time. If I’m doing my duty as your son, I need to arrange help for you, and I’ve already put it off too long.”

“Because I badgered you.” Mrs. Hall sighed, fingering the fringe on her shawl. “I know, John. I do. I’ve known it for a while, and it’s my sheer stubbornness that has gotten in the way. But I’ve taken care of you by myself since your father passed. I took in laundry and did

mending, and I only made pennies, but with those pennies, you had a home and food to eat. I've been a strong woman my whole life, and now . . . now I'm not. Imagine how I feel, John. What if you suddenly lost your legs or your arms, and you couldn't be the person you once were?"

John went down on his knees in front of his mother's chair and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You are a strong woman, Mother. You're the strongest I know. I've watched you doing that mending and that laundry. I've watched you go without so you could give to a hungry neighbor. I've seen you cry, and I've heard your prayers."

His voice choked up, and he had to swallow a few times before he could speak again. "No one else could have carried the burdens you have and done all the things you've done. Now it's time for me to take care of you the very best way I can—not because I'm trying to take anything away from you, but because you deserve to live the rest of your years in safety."

"Oh, John." She reached up and patted his face. "Gracious, are you crying too? What are we, a couple of watering cans? Yes, I'll meet the girl, and I'm sorry that my stubbornness has made you worry so much. I should have been more sensible."

"I understand. And Mother? I love you."

"I love you too, son. Now go fetch two young ladies to meet me—one to take care of me, and one for you to marry. Don't make me wait forever."

"I won't, Mother. I'll bring Lydia tomorrow, and God willing, I'll bring Christina too."

"God willing? I don't hear you speak much about Him these days."

John grinned. "Well, I think Christina may be having a good influence on me in that regard too."

Christina had a good visit with her mother before Mrs. Van Pelt's eyes became too heavy to stay open. Leaving her parents to rest, Christina returned to her room and gathered up only as many supplies as she could reasonably carry on a horse—she assumed she could put her larger bag in one of the saddlebags, so she packed three slates,

three pencils, a beginning reader, and the book that came just after in case Annabeth had already learned her letters. She'd evaluate what else was needed and plan to bring it next time.

As she was leaving her room, she ran into Miss Blythe, who was also exiting her room. "I think what you're doing is wonderful, Miss Van Pelt, and I was wondering if there was any way I could help you," Miss Blythe said. "I've been thinking about it all day, actually."

"Really? Oh, that would be wonderful." Christina grinned. "I'm certain I can use your help. Once I've held this first class, I'll know what sorts of assistance I'll need, and I'll put you to work."

Miss Blythe smiled. "I'm so glad you can use me. I've been feeling a bit isolated lately, like I need to reach out beyond myself and do something to help the world I live in."

Christina gave her friend's arm a squeeze. "What a lucky world to have you in it."

John was waiting for her outside with not just one horse, but two. "What's all this?" she asked, motioning toward the animals.

"I stopped by to see Jerry Wilcox and pled my case."

"Oh? What case is that?"

"I need to protect the new schoolteacher. It would be foolish to send you off on your own—you need someone to go with you. He agreed, and said we could borrow two horses. That's where he draws the line, though—a third horse would be an additional charge, and a buggy would be full price."

Christina grinned. "Well, I'm just glad he agreed to two. Now I won't be lonely on that long ride." She placed her bag inside the nearest horse's saddlebag, then turned to John. "Shall we go?"

"You can ride in that long skirt?"

"Indeed, my dear sir, I can. It's one of my many talents. Notice that I didn't even request a side saddle."

"I did notice that. I wondered if it was an oversight."

"No, that was intentional. I hate them. They make me sit awkwardly, and that always puts a strain on my back. So I learned how to ride with a man's saddle, if you will, and my skirts know they must get out of my way."

He chuckled. "My goodness. That really is a talent."

"What can I say? I'm truly exceptional."

"Yes, you are." He took a step closer. "Christina, I must speak with you, and soon. When will we have some time alone? Even now, I can feel the Cartwright sisters watching us through the parlor window curtains—they believe they're being surreptitious, but they're not very good at that."

"No, they're not." Christina was tempted to glance at the window in question, but decided against it. Let them believe they were spying unobserved. "I don't know, John. Perhaps after class? I do know it can't be now—if we don't hurry, we'll miss our chance to teach before bedtime."

"Yes, I've been watching the time." He lifted his hand as though to touch hers, but dropped it again. "Soon," he said.

"Yes. Soon."

It was so difficult to be reasonable when all she wanted was to find a private moment with him and hear everything he had to say. She was sure he loved her—no man could look at a woman like that unless his feelings were real. But until he said it, she could only hold the hope in her heart.

They rode out to the tent encampment side by side and arrived just as the miners were coming home from work. Christina's hands trembled a little as she lifted her things from the saddlebag—she so hoped everything would go smoothly.

"You'll do a wonderful job," John said in a soft voice as they approached the Hobbs' tent.

"Thank you," she whispered back.

However, when they called out to Annabeth, she opened the tent flap and shook her head. "My husband says no," she told them. "He says we've got too much to do, and not enough time to do it. I'm sorry for making you come all this way, but I didn't know how to reach you."

"Is your husband here?" Christina asked. "Could I speak with him?" Her stomach was twisting in knots, and she felt ill. "Maybe I could answer some questions for him . . ."

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” Annabeth said. “It’s no for sure. But thank you for being willing. That would have been nice.”

Her children peered around her skirts and gave Christina shy smiles. She smiled in return, but her heart was breaking. They wanted to learn, and yet they wouldn’t be allowed. She wanted to understand their father’s perspective, but she’d never lived in such poverty, and she knew she could never truly appreciate their experience. It simply wasn’t something she could fathom.

“Have a good night,” she mumbled as she stepped backward.

She made her way back toward the horses, finding her way blindly. The disappointment stung more sharply than the tears.

“Christina!” John called out from somewhere behind her. She didn’t meant to brush him aside, but she needed to get a short distance away from the tents before she turned around. She didn’t want anyone to see just how badly she was hurting.

When she reached the horses, she fumbled with the buckle on her saddlebag and put the slates and books away. Then she slumped against the animal’s side, where she let her tears come freely.

John slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. She nestled into his chest, which fit her as though they had been created to stand just like this, and allowed herself to give vent to everything that had been building up inside her—the fear of traveling alone, her fears being realized when she learned Mrs. Powers was gone, her anxiety over being rejected, and now actually *being* rejected. Everything she’d worried about had come true. She’d tried to remain positive with each new circumstance, but this was devastating.

“They were the only people in this whole place who wanted me, and now they *don’t* want me,” she said at last, stepping back and wiping her eyes. “Was I being too idealistic? Did I think I was some kind of savior come to rescue them? Was I too prideful? Tell me where I went wrong, John. Tell me what I could have done instead.”

He cupped her face in his hands and wiped her tears with his thumbs. “I don’t think you did anything wrong. You gave them an opportunity, and it wasn’t something they felt they could accept. It’s all right.”

She blinked to clear her vision. He was looking at her with so much love, she almost couldn't bear the ache it caused because she wanted it so much. "Now my parents are going to insist that I go back with them," she said. "With no students, it makes no sense for me to be here."

"Doesn't it, though?" John studied her eyes. "To me, it makes all the sense in the world."

He took a step closer, and then he was kissing her. His hands slid down to her waist and held her, and she wrapped her arms around his neck to keep him from stepping away. She'd needed this—she'd been longing for this. Not just the kiss, but his closeness, his heart—him.

When she finally decided to let him go, he grinned. "I assume that means a marriage proposal wouldn't go awry?"

"No, not in the slightest. I'll marry you whenever you want."

"I'd like to speak with your father first, considering that we've known each other such a short amount of time, but I see no reason to delay much beyond that."

"Neither do I." She tucked her arm through his and rested her head on his shoulder. "Should we head back?"

"Yes. I have a father to speak with."

"Hold up there just a minute."

At the new voice, they turned to see Jeb Astle striding toward them. "What's this I hear about the Hobbs decidin' not to have their lessons anymore?"

"Mr. Hobbs needed their help at home," Christina replied. It was the kindest way to put it.

"Well, that's a bunch of stuff that comes out of the north end of a southbound donkey! Beggin' your pardon, miss. I'm just saying what I feel."

Christina grinned. "I was having similar thoughts, but you phrased it so much more eloquently than I could have."

"With them quitting on you, does this mean there's no more school?"

"I'm afraid so. I can't teach if I don't have any students."

Jeb stroked his beard. "Well, that doesn't sit well with me. Not for

one minute. Seems a rotten shame.” He paused as if thinking. “Hold on there—let me see what I can do.”

“I’m not sure if there’s anything that can be done,” Christina replied.

“Well, there’s always *something*.” He strode out to the middle of the tent city and cupped his hands around his mouth. “All right, you men. Come on out—we need to have ourselves a chat.”

The men slowly left their tents and trickled toward Jeb until he was surrounded. He stood there waiting until they’d all arrived, his hands on his hips. Once he was satisfied, he gave a nod. “Now, listen up. We’ve had a genuine teacher come here from all the way back east offerin’ to teach us and our children how to read, and she’s doin’ it out of the goodness of her heart. She doesn’t want one thing from us—she just wants to give us a leg up. Well, I’ve decided that’s too good an offer to pass up, and I’m gonna take her up on it.” He turned to face Christina. “Teacher, I’d like to be your first student.”

Christina’s eyes were brimming again, but this time, the tears were caused by joy. “Thank you, Jeb. Yes, you may be the very first.”

“There you have it.” He turned back to the crowd. “Now, I know what you’re thinking—that I’ve gone soft. Well, maybe I have, but maybe I’ve finally gotten smart and realized what getting a better education could do for me. And it’s time for a bunch of you to get smart too!”

“What if we get all this education, but we still can’t land a better job?” one of the men called out.

“You’ll be a better person for the learning, that’s what,” Jeb replied. “So, who’s with me? Who’s ready to step up and make some real life changes here?”

One by one, about five of the men raised their hands.

Over the course of the next few minutes, ten of the children and two of the women were also on board.

Christina wrote their names down eagerly, hardly believing what was happening. Jeb’s leadership was turning everything around—plus the implied pressure he put on the men to show what they were really made of. The source of their motivation didn’t matter. It was

happening after all, this little school of hers.

It was now too late to begin their first lesson, so Christina told everyone she'd be back the following Monday night. As she glanced around, she noticed Mrs. Brown on the edges of the group, and she suddenly knew how Miss Blythe could help. She'd bring her to give Mrs. Brown some help with her work so Mrs. Brown could have a moment to learn as well.

"Thank you, Jeb," she said, shaking the big man's hand. "This truly is a miracle, and you made it happen."

"I just never could stand to see a woman cry," he replied, looking sheepish and proud at the same time.

Christina and John walked back toward the horses. Her heart was so light, she thought it might fly right out of her chest. John reached over and took her hand, and she couldn't help it—she began to skip.

He laughed. "Happy?"

"So, so happy. I can't believe how miserable I was just thirty minutes ago, and now I feel like I could dance away on that moonbeam."

He gave her hand a little tug, and she turned to face him. Once again, he enveloped her in his arms and kissed her until she was dizzy—the best kind of dizzy. Then she giggled, unable to help herself.

"Oh, dear," she said when she could talk again. "I just realized that I forgot Miss Sybil's umbrella, and now look at us."

"Her umbrella?" John looked confused. "Why would you need her umbrella?"

"Never mind," Christina said, wrapping her arms around his neck again. "I'll explain it later."

“That was a lovely ceremony, my dear. One of the best I’ve ever seen,” Miss Sybil said, giving Christina a hug. “You and Mr. Hall are going to be blissfully happy. I just know it.”

“It couldn’t have happened without the two of you,” Christina replied, smiling at Miss Sybil and then turning to Miss Sophia. “You changed my life. Thank you so much.”

“It was our pleasure,” Miss Sophia said. “Ours entirely.”

The chapel had been filled nearly to the brim because of John’s connections in the community. All his school children had wanted to attend, and Christina had been amused to see Billy giving Molly one of the flowers from the church garden out front. He was turning into quite the little romantic himself.

The three most important guests, though, were Christina’s parents and John’s mother. Mrs. Hall was an absolute delight. When she’d met Christina, she’d taken both her hands and said, “Thank you for marrying him. I didn’t think he’d ever get married.”

“You’re welcome,” Christina replied. “I’m glad he waited for me.”

“That’s exactly what I told him! I said, ‘John, she’s the one you’ve been waiting for.’”

As everyone made their way from the church, Christina watched them leave, anticipating making friends with all of them eventually. “Thank you for staying an extra few days so you could be here for this,” she said when her mother came up beside her.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for anything.” Mrs. Van Pelt’s eyes began to tear up yet again. She’d been crying all day. “Oh, darling, I’m going to miss you terribly, but I’m so happy for you. John seems like a wonderful man, and I adore his mother, and your school will be such a success. You’ve truly found your place here, I believe.”

“And we’ll be back to visit when we can,” Mr. Van Pelt added.

Christina gave each of them a hug, then turned toward her new husband, who was walking toward her from the hallway where he’d been speaking with his mother and Lydia. “Shall we go?” she said, holding out her arm for him.

“Yes. Let’s go,” he replied, leading her toward their buggy, rented from Wilcox’s, to ride off into their new lives together.

About Amelia C. Adams

Amelia traces her family tree right back to the settlement of the Old West—her great-great-grandmother even drove a wagon to her new home. Amelia is a wife, a mother, and a novelist. She spends her days dreaming up stories and her nights writing them down. Her biggest hero is her husband, and you might just see bits and pieces of him as you read her novels. She loves all things historical and enjoys learning about days gone by, but she's glad she was born in modern times because the Internet is awesome, and she's glad she doesn't have to wash her clothes by hand in a galvanized tub. She's an eater of tacos, a taker of naps, and a dreamer of dreams. You can reach Amelia at ameliaadamsauthor@gmail.com.

And if you've enjoyed any of her novels, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. It's much appreciated!

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